LEFT 4 DEAD IN SPACE: A MONSTROUS EVOLUTION OF THE FPS

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HIGHLIGHTS THIEF ■ THE LAST OF US: LEFT BEHIND ■ THE ORDER: 1886 ■ ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE ■ DONKEY KONG COUNTRY: TROPICAL FREEZE ■ HOTLINE MIAMI 2 ■ WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER ■ CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW 2



You will of course be fully aware of Snake's adventures, even if you haven't personally sampled many of them, so ubiquitous has the bandana-wearing assassin become since he debuted on PlayStation back in 1998. You might think by now that we can get away with a few choice Kojima quotes, print a few screenshots and our work will be done, but as is always the case, things are never that simple.

For one thing we have two consecutive games to consider, there are two generations of hardware to make use of, an open world for Snake to explore for the first time and, partly as a consequence, an unprecedented breadth of gameplay styles to indulge in. *Metal Gear Solid V*'s split release, as *Ground Zeroes* and *The Phantom Pain*, are in themselves both a continuation and a new beginning, with all the risks and opportunities that come with trying to bring an established name to a new audience while keeping the most ardent fans onside. How Kojima has tackled all these opposing forces – not to mention the intense levels of expectation – will be key to the success of *Metal Gear* in what could be its most transformative year since the series became *Solid*.

Richard Shoemaker
EDITOR

SONIC
RINGS 145



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MILES

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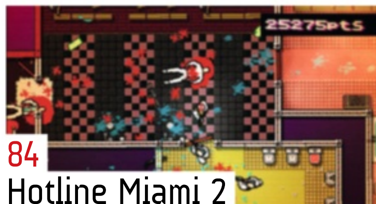
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All For One

It's Monster vs Hunters as Turtle Rock Studios unveils Evolve, the long-awaited follow up to Left 4 Dead

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(Wii U REPORT)

The Nintendo Health Plan

→ As Nintendo announces a new platform focused on wellbeing, how is it aiming to improve Wii U's quality of life?

No two ways about it: these are testing times for Nintendo. Its recent financial results lay bare its current struggles, particularly with regard to its home console business. Its third-quarter figures followed a significant revision of its optimistic sales estimates for Wii U, down from 9 million to 2.85 million. That's less than a third of the original forecast, and it still has to sell another 400,000 consoles before April to reach that adjusted tally.

Meanwhile, Nintendo's grossly inflated figures managed to give the 3DS's strong year a downbeat twist ending. After what many would suggest was a banner year for the handheld, with numerous high-quality software releases and the biggest sales of any current gaming device, estimates still had to be revised down – from 18 million to 13.5 million units sold. Those numbers might yet hint at a wider malaise within the console industry. Even as strong early sales of PlayStation 4 and Xbox One suggest otherwise, it remains to be seen whether Sony and Microsoft can take advantage of the initial excitement surrounding new-generation hardware, or whether business will dwindle after the rush of early adopters.

Regardless, the Xbox One and PlayStation 4 are enjoying a far more positive start than the Wii U. In the United Kingdom, indeed, less than a week had passed before both had outsold the lifetime figures for Nintendo's latest console. The difference hasn't been quite so extreme in other territories, but the sales follow a similar pattern, while Nintendo's historically rocky relationship with third-party publishers keeps plumbing new depths. It began with Ubisoft – historically one of Nintendo's strongest allies – deciding that *Rayman Legends*, promoted heavily by Nintendo in the run-up to Wii U's launch, would be delayed and ported to other formats. EA, meanwhile, decided that *FIFA 14* wouldn't be released on Wii U, the first time in over a decade the series had skipped a current Nintendo console. Just four games from the publisher – all of them ports of existing PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 games – have been released on Wii U to date, with no plans to add to that meagre total.

Below A generation of players is growing up with *Minecraft* and *Angry Birds* rather than *Mario* – Nintendo needs to maintain the prominence of its brands.



How did it come to this? There are several factors to consider. Nintendo's 'blue ocean' strategy worked for a generation, but it failed to capitalise on the gains it had made. The audience of casual players that were won over by the likes of *Wii Sports*, *Wii Fit* and *Brain Training* were soon distracted by fresh novelties. Kinect was quite successfully pitched as the next evolution in motion controls, even if Microsoft's camera invariably ended up in many cupboards, left to collect dust alongside the Wii Balance Board. Then began the increasingly rapid rise of smartphone, tablet and browser-based gaming: simple, accessible and free to a vast potential audience.

The ubiquity of phones and tablets, devices that offer wider-ranging functionality, has undoubtedly led to a dwindling market for bespoke gaming portables. Vita is labouring, and while 3DS has enjoyed healthy sales by normal standards, its successes pale next to

DATA STREAM → CALL OF DUTY TO CONTINUE UNTIL 2016 – SLEDGEHAMMER OUTED FOR 2014 EDITION

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> "Nintendo wants a new Brain Training or Wii Fit – a breakout idea that appeals to people outside the usual videogame sphere"

its immediate predecessor. It's a device that fits a niche for people seeking deeper, higher quality experiences on the go, but that market is tiny compared to the one that doesn't use its mobile devices primarily for games. This audience is perfectly happy with games of merely adequate quality if it means they don't have to pay. On the face of things, even games funded through microtransactions compare favourably: the difference between 69p and £35 is significant, after all.

IN THEORY, NINTENDO'S PUSH towards second-screen gaming was a natural response to the inexorable rise of Apple and Android devices. Yet Wii U's central hook has been poorly marketed – some consumers still think it's a peripheral for the original Wii rather than a console in its own right, as Nintendo freely admitted at its recent investors' meeting. And, more to the point, it's a gimmick that doesn't appeal enough to either core gamers or the expanded market. On the one hand, you have a comparatively underpowered device; on the other you have a complex controller whose buttons, sticks and triggers are off-putting to those won over by the streamlined, intuitive Wii remote.

This isn't, of course, the first time that Nintendo has struggled in a competitive market: the GameCube similarly languished well behind the market leader, Sony's PlayStation 2. The difference between now and then is that Nintendo still amassed a tidy profit during that time, making money on hardware and software, even as Sony dominated. As a console boasting broadly similar technical specifications to its rivals, it could still rely on a degree of third-party support, though even then its ties to publishers were beginning to loosen. Wii U, however, can't count on the help of others – ports of PS3 and 360 titles have sold poorly, while few publishers will be able to easily downscale their eighth-generation titles. If Wii U is to be saved, then barring the support of a handful of independent devs still keen to ply

Above While off-screen play is a key part of the Wii U GamePad's appeal, it's curious that *Donkey Kong Country Tropical Freeze* should leave the display blank for players using the TV – especially in light of Iwata's comments about using the controller's features more.





Right The iOS *Pokémon* app shows that Nintendo understands the value of mobile formats as a way of promoting its key brands.

CREATOR REMOVES MOBILE PHENOMENON FLAPPY BIRD FROM SALE AS CLONES FILL THE VOID

their wares on the eShop, Nintendo is going to have to begin its rescue mission alone.

Can Wii U even *be* saved at this stage? Its figures are currently tracking even lower than those of Sega's ill-fated Dreamcast, a console which famously wilted once big-name publishers withdrew their support. But Sega didn't have the development portfolio that Nintendo does, and while hardware sales are far from encouraging, there are signs that plenty of those who did take a punt on Wii U are enjoying their time with it: the likes of *Wii Party U*, *Super Mario 3D World* and *The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker HD* have all sold over a million copies. Pocket change compared with the likes of *Grand Theft Auto V*, perhaps, but it's a sign that Nintendo still has a core base of loyal fans who'll stick with it through thick and thin.

Once the likes of *Mario Kart 8* and *Super Smash Bros* have been released, we'll have a clearer picture of just how much longer the Wii U can limp on for: the former in particular is still one of Nintendo's most popular series, and represents perhaps the best chance of lifting the ailing hardware. Nintendo president and CEO Satoru Iwata has ruled out a price cut, but a bundle with both games could yet see 2014 become the year of Wii U.

Right 3DS and Wii U felt like Nintendo trying to rebottle lightning, to capitalise on successes rather than forging its own path. Little wonder it's looking to try something completely different.

More likely is that we'll see a brief spike in sales before a swift return to the current status quo. Not that Nintendo isn't already planning ahead for such an eventuality. The prevailing wisdom was that Nintendo was set to go mobile, a narrative perpetuated by business analysts, investors and the press that accompanied every bad-news story for the company. Even Japan's leading financial publication *The Nikkei* got in on the act, claiming that Nintendo was planning to use smartphones to market Nintendo hardware and software, as well as freely distributed promotional mini-games.

NINTENDO QUICKLY MOVED to dismiss this idea, and it's easy to see why going mobile might not be the answer to the company's problems. The assumption was that Nintendo games would automatically attract the attention of the hundreds of millions of smartphone users and yet other publishers have only seen moderate success in porting classic games to such devices. The process of Nintendo adapting its games for non-physical controls isn't as quick and simple as many seem to believe. Nintendo designs its games around its own hardware, and to suddenly change that would be to step away from one of the defining factors behind Nintendo's success over the years. Slapping Mario on an iPad and expecting it to solve all its problems would be one of the worst things Nintendo could do, and Iwata is savvy enough to have acknowledged that: "The spread of devices does not spell the end of game consoles. It's not that simple. It doesn't mean that we should put Mario on smartphones." That said, Nintendo will be launching a service for phones and tablets by the end of 2014, in order to "form stronger ties with consumers and communicate the value of [Nintendo's] entertainment offerings", though precisely what form this will take remains to be seen.

In the longer term, Nintendo's plan involves a new platform, set for release between April 2015 and March 2016. Iwata claims it will offer a non-traditional entertainment experience that is entirely separate from its current systems, with a focus on "quality of life", initially centring on health. Rather than an expansion of *Wii Fit*, it's said to use non-wearable technology as Nintendo pursues what Iwata refers to as "another blue ocean". The plan is then to combine its videogames know-how with the



Above We probably won't see *Mario* on the iPad any time soon.

Below Media calls for Iwata to resign seem premature and unedifying in light of the previous generation's successes.



Below Iwata admitting he'd "misread" foreign markets was a sign of a company that can struggle to see past Japan's borders.



> "It's easy to see why going mobile might not be the answer to the company's problems"

COP-THEMED BATTLEFIELD RUMOURED FOR 2015 → NEW WORMS COMING TO PS4 AND XBOX ONE

new platform to, as Iwata puts it, "create a synergistic effect", leading to new types of game. It ultimately boils down to Nintendo's desire to create a new *Brain Training* or *Wii Fit*, a breakout idea that appeals to people outside the usual videogame sphere.

Happily, Nintendo seems determined that this third pillar won't negatively affect its approach to making games. "We will definitely maintain dedicated videogame platforms as our core business," insisted Iwata, as he outlined plans for an account system covering multiple devices, and a new pricing structure for games that would reduce the cost of purchase for more dedicated players with extra credit given to those encouraging others to play. In the wake of one of Nintendo's strongest years for software to date – for all its struggles, 2013 saw it release a string of critical and commercial hits, including *Pokémon X* and *Y*, *Fire Emblem: Awakening*, *Super Mario 3D World* and *The Legend Of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds* – that can only be a good sign. Nintendo the platform-holder may be facing its most significant challenge to date, but as long as Nintendo the game-maker can still produce games of a similar calibre, its fanbase will continue to follow – wherever it's headed.





Left Nintendo's mention of a 'new platform' to support NNID may be some form of hybrid device – last year it merged its handheld and home console divisions.



Left Nintendo is planning a more flexible approach to leveraging its existing brands, as it seeks partners to "expose global consumers to Nintendo characters".

THE FIVE-STEP PLAN

➔ Examining the ways Nintendo is aiming to turn around its recent fortunes



1 DS VIRTUAL CONSOLE GAMES

"We are now sure that we can solve the technical problem of displaying Virtual Console software from Nintendo DS on the GamePad," said Iwata at Nintendo's late January financial meeting. Having the highlights of the DS's extensive library on Wii U is a definite plus, though there are potential problems to resolve – not least the need to hold the GamePad vertically for most games. With the two screens appearing side by side on the display, it should be ideal for touch-based games where the DS was held like a book, but perhaps less so for games using the D-pad and buttons, or a combination of traditional and touch controls.



2 DOUBLING DOWN ON GAMEPAD

Some commentators had suggested Nintendo might enjoy some success with a cheaper Wii U SKU that eschewed the GamePad – apparently ignoring the fact it would render several games unplayable, not to mention reducing the functionality of Miiverse and other features. Instead, Nintendo plans to "enrich the value of the GamePad" with a raft of games designed to take advantage of its capabilities – ironically preceding a mention of *Mario Kart 8*, which uses the screen to display a giant button to sound your horn. There will be increased use of the controller's built-in Near Field Communication feature, and a Quick Start menu allowing much swifter boot times for off-screen play.



3 A UNIFIED ACCOUNTS SYSTEM

Nintendo has attracted criticism for its current setup with regard to digital purchases. As things stand, transactions are tied to individual units rather than an account system, which means games can't be used across multiple devices – lose or break your console and your collection is gone with it. The recently introduced Nintendo Network ID is, Iwata says, "the first step of our efforts to transform customer relationship management from device-based to account-based", with any future Nintendo platforms using an account system. NNID will also be compatible with Nintendo software on phones and tablets, which brings us neatly to…



4 A NINTENDO APP FOR SMART DEVICES

Nintendo has asked a "small, select team of developers" to release content for phones and tablets, with an aim to "focus on achieving greater ties with […] consumers and expanding [Nintendo's] platform business." Already, users can use touch devices to connect to Miiverse, while The Pokémon Company launched the Pokédex 3D Pro app on the App Store, so this isn't an entirely unprecedented step. It does, however, represent a stronger commitment from Nintendo towards expanding its reach, while Iwata hints that it could be more than just a promotional tool, explaining that he isn't "ruling out the possibility of making games or using our game characters".



5 'QUALITY OF LIFE' PLATFORM

From hanafuda cards to toys, from toys to videogames – whenever its current business is struggling, Nintendo has historically looked to new avenues of expansion. To which end, it's currently working on a platform entirely independent of its videogames business, which is designed to "improve people's QOL [quality of life] in enjoyable ways". Iwata claims it will use "non-wearable" technology, which could be anything from neural interfaces to projectors to cloud-based services. The long-term hope is that the process of developing new experiences in this field will feed back into the way Nintendo makes games.

➔ A MONUMENT TO EVE ONLINE PLAYERS IS BEING ERECTED IN THE CENTRE OF REYKJAVIK, ICELAND ➔

(AN OLD GEM RESURFACES)

Dungeon Keeper's Gold Rush

It's been 17 years since the original became Peter Molyneux's celebrated swan song as he departed Bullfrog to found Lionhead, and now EA's mobile recreation of *Dungeon Keeper* has been upsetting fans and original designer alike since its February release. "I don't think they've got it quite right" said Molyneux to the BBC on EA's implementation. Criticising the heavy-handed way in which players are driven to part with their cash as 'ridiculous' he said: "I just want to make a dungeon. I don't want to schedule it on my alarm clock for six days to come back for a block to be chipped."

Common to the original game and it's 1999 sequel, the new *Dungeon Keeper* allows players to hollow out a subterranean kingdom, set it with traps and thwart the minions of other dungeon lords.

As well as being deeply revered, the original game is cited as one of the earliest examples of the tower defence genre, which is perhaps to damn it with faint praise.

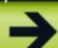
→ Does EA's Dungeon Keeper highlight the worst excesses of F2P gaming or is it the tarnishing of a favoured classic that most offends gamers?

Like most of Bullfrog's Nineties output, *Dungeon Keeper* married accessibility with genuine challenge, within a theme that was simultaneously charming and unsettling. Little wonder that since its 1997 release *Dungeon Keeper* has been among the games most would like to see recreated. Molyneux himself had repeatedly called for a EA to sanction an official follow-up, although he likely now wishes EA hadn't bothered.

Rather than being able to spend endless hours constructing devious traps and managing resources, EA's *Dungeon Keeper* is designed for snatches of play in between Facebook visits at bus stops, with gems available as in-app purchases to speed up play in much the same way as in titles like the ubiquitous *Clash Of Clans*. While gems are expensive – £3 for 800 with the price of a third Imp being 500 – it's perhaps not so much the prices that are an issue, rather that such a beloved game has been revived as a means to mine cash from gamers while only superficially referencing the appeal and depth of the original games. As an example the game simultaneously mocks the prevalence of in-game purchases while continuously



Below Old Horny tells it like it is: EA want to help you, for the price of a few gems.

 UNDEAD LABS ANNOUNCES NEW EXPANSION FOR STATE OF DECAY  GOAT SIMULATOR COMING TO PC

Inset While it looks authentic, cash shops weren't a feature of the original.



Inset *War For The Overworld* may be the only hope *Dungeon Keeper* fans have left for a spiritual successor to Bullfrog's classic.

> "I don't think they got it quite right, the balance between keeping it familiar to the fans, but fresh enough for the this much bigger mobile audience"
>
> Peter Molyneux, 22 Cans

nagging players to indulge in them, using the twisted logic of *Dungeon Keeper*'s iconic Horned Reaper as an excuse.

BY WAY OF an attempt to head off criticism EA implemented an ill-advised attempt to skew feedback on the games Google Play page, by allowing only five star ratings to be posted in-game with lesser scores supposedly routed via EA. The justification being that EA "wanted to make it easier for more players to send [us] feedback directly from the game if they weren't having the best experience." It seems to be the financial aspect that is most offensive, with one reviewer amusingly giving the game one star, inviting EA to pay to unlock the others.

While mobile *Dungeon Keeper* perhaps isn't quite the evil blight on core gaming that some would have us believe, it is undeniably worlds away from the game the series deserves. Thankfully there is a more promising tribute in the works, *War For The Overworld* (which was the subtitle of a planned *Dungeon Keeper 3*), which in gameplay terms appears every bit to be *Dungeon Keeper*'s spiritual successor and, more to the point, the only one to date that has received Molyneux's blessing. 

THEME REBOOT

→ There have been a number of classic games adapted for modern audiences, although most have received more of a kicking than a reboot



LORD OF ULTIMA (2010)

■ Before we were all swiping away on tablets, browser-based games were the gateway to a world of F2P adventure and in reviving the *Ultima* brand, EA probably thought hordes of Lord British's acolytes would sign up. There was little to tie it in with the RPG series, and it was quickly revealed to be an *Evony* clone. It's due to close in May.



COMMAND & CONQUER: TIBERIUM ALLIANCES (2012)

■ Not content with sullying the good name of *Ultima*, EA tried again with *Command & Conquer*. While still running, the game is largely forgotten but for accusations of plagiarism when it was spotted by keen eyes that some of the tanks were uncannily similar to those of *Warhammer 40K*.



THEME PARK (2012)

■ If you thought EA's touchscreen version of *Dungeon Keeper* was an abomination, it wasn't the first. *Theme Park* preceded it and has been offering much the same time-locked gameplay with initially much steeper prices and just as much frustration. Of course it looks much cuter than its darker brother, which is at least something.



SYNDICATE (2012)

■ As far removed as it was from Bullfrog's original isometric shooter, Starbreeze's modern remake at least had its heart in the right place and offered an agreeable if unspectacular challenge that perhaps borrowed too heavily from *Deus Ex*. It sadly bombed, which means until it gets the touchscreen treatment, the IP is effectively dead.



SIMCITY (2013)

■ Launch issues and PR disasters aside, *SimCity* was a fine return for the city-building sim, a game where accessibility and reverence for the original were pitched almost to perfection, with the right number of modern concessions for the game to feel fresh. Its play area felt more *SimTown* than *SimCity*, but the foundations were solid.



COMMAND & CONQUER (TBA)

■ Intended as a sequel to 2002's *C&C: Generals* before being repurposed as a free-to-play game, the on-again off-again saga of a proper *Command & Conquer* reboot remains unsure. The last word from EA at the end of 2013 was that a new studio was being sought. Perhaps the developer of *Renegade X* might like to give it a shot?

(OPINION)

Amazon's Android Box: Is there any more room in the market?

With rumours circulating that online retailer Amazon is manufacturing a games console that will undercut both the Xbox One and PS4, we question the current situation of the console industry, and consider if there's room for another competitor…



Amazon is a superpower in the retail world – almost monopolising the online shopping market wasn't enough, so they moved into self-publishing. That ended up being a resounding success, too (we have Amazon's self-publishing arm to thank for *Fifty Shades Of Grey*…) and so the company doubled down on its hardware division – giving birth to the Kindle family of e-readers and tablets. Again, Amazon nailed it – partnering up with Android assured an accessible, easy to use interface and direct access to Amazon stores exclusively. By undercutting the iPad by a substantial margin, the Kindle Fire opened up a significant market for Amazon – one that the company has been capitalising on.

Now the tech giant has turned its gaze upon gaming, reportedly recruiting a vast amount of staff to its own games development team: Amazon Games Studio. Based in California, the studio is seeking industry veterans with experience in triple-A games. This makes us think that Amazon is keen to go up against the big three traditional console-makers/publishers – namely Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft. If Amazon's history is indicative of where the company's headed, then we're likely to see the Amazon console significantly undercut the Xbox One and PS4. (In an invite sent to a recruitment event over in America, Amazon actively stated that it would like to "disrupt the current marketplace").



Above Maybe all this is just setting up Amazon's drone delivery service – we all think we'll be playing some top-down flying game, but actually we'll be delivering parcels.

BUT, WITH APPLE reportedly adding gaming functionality to the Apple TV any day now, are we going to see an oversaturation of consoles floating around the market? With Amazon pitching in on the console landscape, we're in danger of reverting back to a paradigm the industry suffered in the Nineties – where every manufacturer wanted to elbow in on the hardware market, ending up with critical failures like the CDi, the 3DO and Sega's various add-on consoles (which, up against Atari, Nintendo, Sega proper, never really had a chance). We've already seen some spectacular failures this generation – the Ouya, Gamestick and OnLive all failed to gain any traction with their audiences. In light of that, what's to stop Amazon's new wonder-device failing just as badly as its other short-lived competitors?



Amazon has the tech, that's a start. The rumoured console is apparently being designed by Lab 126 – the same company that designed the Kindle hardware. Then there's Amazon's pre-existing customer base – estimated at roughly 200 million – and the now Amazon-owned LoveFilm streaming service. If the company's endgame is injecting digital media into the average gamer's home, rather than just offering a gaming system, then it seems it has all the foundations laid out perfectly.

Considering Sony have been struggling to keep their stock rating positive recently, and looking at how Nintendo's hardware sales have been dwindling, it's easy to see why Amazon are attempting to seize the gaming industry's reins. Despite Amazon's internal games studio targeting the triple-A experience, it stands to reason that the



Above Though we're dubious about the highest quality of games that could run on Android, we've been pleasantly surprised by some titles.

> "We've already seen some spectacular failures this gen"


THE EVIL WITHIN RELEASE IN AUGUST

MONSTER HUNTER 4 CONFIRMED FOR EARLY 2015 RELEASE



Inset Apparently Amazon has been pressuring Android games developers to add controller support to their games.

retailer will focus on getting the smaller, more casual games developers (Rovio, King, Imangi, Vlambeer) onside too, in attempts to mimic the success mobile games have seen over the last few years.

It's an idea the hardcore gamer may balk at – playing *Angry Birds* on your 52" plasma TV – but the casual, free-to-play market can't be underestimated. In theory, Amazon wouldn't even have to court the high-tier console developers (EA, Ubisoft, 2K et al) – if the retailer can promise an audience of 200 million-plus, each with specific buyer data ripe for targeted ads, mid-tier developers will flock to Amazon.

Where the Ouya, Gamestick and OnLive consoles failed, Amazon may succeed – it's got a captive audience, and they've got LoveFilm. If Amazon intends to undercut the competition like it did with Apple, we could see a low-price console catering for that huge, untapped demographic somewhere between casual and hardcore. Who knows – once Amazon's game studio is up, we could even see a service similar to Kindle's Direct Publishing materialise. If



Amazon launched a service that allowed Indies to release their game, retaining autonomy over their property, it could even rival Steam. Yes, there'd be a *lot* of weak games on the store, but surely it'd be worth wading through the *Fifty Shades Of Greys* if we get the gaming equivalent of *The Great Gatsby*. Or whatever floats your literary boat.





Above The Ouya is probably the device closest to Amazon's proposed hardware.

Above Running on its own operating system and full of empty promises.

OTHER WAYS TO GAMIFY YOUR ENTIRE LIFE

We consider other ways in which companies could secretly smuggle games into all walks of life



APPLE TV

More than likely, this is the product Amazon wants to target the most – the Apple TV lets you stream content from any Apple product in your house directly to your screen, and with an update in the works that'll open up the gaming part of the App Store on the device, you can be sure to see people Temple Running or Candy Crushing during prime-time hours, ignoring the glut of soap operas clogging up the airwaves.



GOOGLE GLASS

It's been revealed in consumer research that 80 per cent of people won't wear Google Glass because they'll feel like idiots. It's a shame, though; if Google Glass took off, imagine being able to walk around with a HUD superimposed on top of everything. Your bank balance could be in the bottom-left, Facebook/Twitter notifications top-right, and a GPS mini-map bottom right. You'd look stupid, but imagine how organised you'd be!

SMART BANDS



A budding trend on the tech scene, Smart Bands are intelligent bracelets that hook up to your phone and receive all notifications and alerts. Samsung's Galaxy Gear and Razer's Nabu are heading up the market, and every time we see those little digital displays flashing off people's wrists, we can't help but think we're one step away from some weird, pan-global augmented reality MMO.



TWITTER

It's been said before, but let's be honest – Twitter is a game, right? Every new follower is a power-up, another step towards the endgame that doesn't really exist. Get a retweet, that's like a bonus multiplier. A favourite, that's increasing your reputation. Do something wrong – say the wrong thing, don't reply to someone, mouth off at the wrong time – and you'll lose followers, setting you back a few levels. Perhaps it's because of all these similarities that so many gamers find themselves addicted to Twitter?

HALO 2 ANNIVERSARY IS RUMOURED FOR A LATE 2014 RELEASE ON XBOX ONE, FOLLOWED BY HALO 5 IN 2015

(FROM SOFTWARE SPEAKS)

Back From The Dead

games™ sits down with From Software's Tak Miyazoe, producer on Dark Souls II, to talk about the future of the Souls franchise. With the promise of a more expansive world and tougher obstacles to overcome, Miyazoe prepares us to die once again

The *Souls* series has been gradually evolving since *Demon's Souls*, continuing to refine systems and adding involving new mechanics, but what constant defines the franchise?
I think the sense of achievement, that sense of satisfaction when you're able to overcome the difficulties in the game, that has been a concept through the entirety of From Software's series. It's that fist-clenching sense of 'Yeah!' whenever you can overcome a boss or enemy or anything in the game.

You seem to have gone back more to the design of *Demon's Souls* with some elements. Did you want to return to the series' roots with *Dark Souls II*?
It's not necessarily going back to the roots. We wanted to carry on the *Dark Souls* experience from the first one and provide a good sequel to that. We also needed to put new elements into the game and those elements just so happen to be some of the features in *Demon's Souls*, and we've also added brand new original features as well. We wanted to keep the core essence of what *Dark Souls* should be but continue to innovate for fans that continue to play.

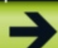
Was this the impetus behind telling a new story within the same universe and not making a direct sequel?
For us to try something new, we wanted to keep the same universe but make sure the stories took place in different locations. We can try new ideas out. Tanimura-san is a big *Dark Souls* fan and a fan of *King's Field* and one of the hardest things for him was to make sure he brought in new elements. And for him to do that in terms of lore he had to separate it from the first *Dark Souls* so that we could bring in new lore, new history and new gameplay elements.



Below From Software has constructed the world of *Dark Souls II* to feel more alive than its predecessor and, therefore, more unpredictable.

How beneficial was the recent online beta in terms of balancing the lauded difficulty of *Souls* in the sequel?
Our main purpose was to see how it would impact our own dedicated gaming server we're implanting, making sure we could properly attend to the traffic that goes back and forth within the servers. But it was a good eye opener in terms of understanding how players play in the online space. How much they summon, how much they invade, how many blood messages they leave on the ground – all that was very informative for us to make sure we properly tune the game.





TEACHER CLAIMS TO HAVE GHOST-WRITTEN FOR RESI COMPOSER MAMORU SAMURAGOCHI FOR 18 YEARS



Inset Perhaps indicative of the new directors' style, everything seems much brighter in general in this region of *Dark Souls*' fantasy world.





Did you discover any surprises in regards to player data that conflicted with what you know from *Dark Souls*?
I think a little bit. Me, personally, one of the things I noticed was the blood messaging. It was a cool feature in the original. So if you write jump some players will jump while others won't but for *Dark Souls II*, because you can rate the messages and that will have a benefit in the game itself – seeing your energy recover as people rate – so watching how many blood messages there were and how they actually do benefit players was fun to see.

The two-hour time window that the beta last year offered added an interesting dynamic. Have you considered implementing similar twists on the design?
Not really. Obviously time is something always chasing and it added a new angle to the beta itself. I think *Dark Souls II*, the reason we didn't add that element of time, is that there's a whole bunch of different play styles, there are people who want to run through the whole game, there's players that take one step at a time so that they're as careful as possible and try not to die as much as possible. I can guarantee that when you are able to defeat bosses in the game, that sense of achievement and satisfaction will be there.

Above *Dark Souls II* introduces the Soul Vessel, among other things. It enables players to reset parameters and re-spec their class at various points in the game.



Above The game begins much like *Dark Souls* with a ridiculously tough enemy to defeat.

> "I can guarantee that when you are able to defeat bosses in the game, that sense of achievement and satisfaction will be there"
>
> Tak Miyazoe, Producer

Has it been difficult to deal with the closer scrutiny from fans of the first *Dark Souls*?
It is in a way, but we don't want to disappoint anyone. Over the past few months we've really been concentrating on anything we've added not taking away from the *Dark Souls* experience. Features like the life gems, the estus flask, everything in the games sort of balance together I think, so everything has a connection to all the features in the game.

What did the new directors Tomohiro Shibuya and Yui Tanimura bring to the franchise in terms of a new approach and style?
Obviously the two new directors brought in a new wind to the *Dark Souls* franchise. Miyazaki-san brought forward this dark fantasy world that was so original. But in *Dark Souls II* the gameplay elements were really brought to life by things like the new game engine, motion capture animations, the way the game plays with light and dark. The visual improvements are not just for eye candy. They all have meaning. You'll see a shadow moving in the background will hopefully have some meaning. You'll see the grass moving and you'll feel the wind and that'll have a meaning in the game as well. The gameplay mechanics were really brought to life by the new technicalities they brought to the franchise. 

BRINGING SOULS TO NEXT-GEN

FAN FEEDBACK IS KEY TO DARK SOULS' FUTURE

■ AFTER MUCH SPECULATION that From Software would be bringing *Dark Souls II* to PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, we questioned producer Tak Miyazoe about whether the franchise will make the jump the next-gen consoles. "Obviously next-gen platforms have a lot of potential and the power they have is incredible," says Miyazoe. "The reason *Dark Souls II* is on current-gen and PC is because our goal was to deliver the game as soon as possible to fans. We felt there was still a lot of potential within the current-gen consoles. Next-gen consoles are big, we don't have any plans to develop on them at this point. But fan feedback is key to taking the next step, making our next decisions. But if I had my way it'd be fun to develop on next-gen but we don't have plans. Hopefully *Dark Souls II* will be successful and we'll have the chance to continue building on the franchise."

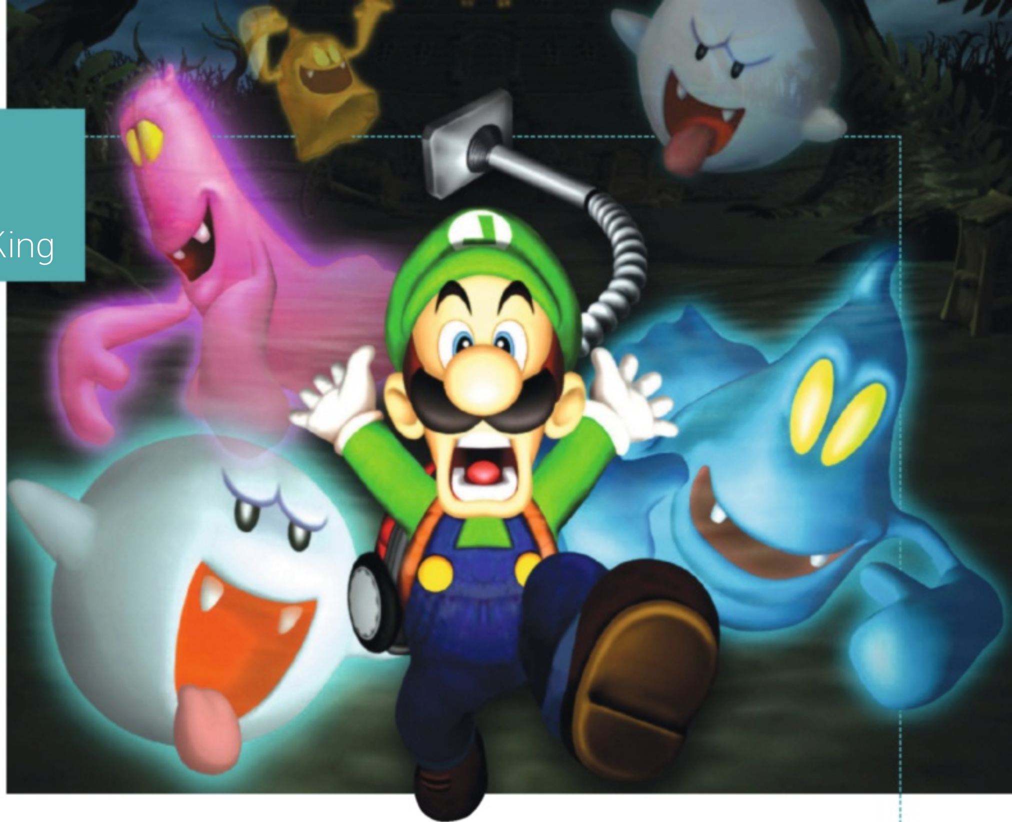


Above At a *Dark Souls II* event in January, Tak Miyazoe announced Peter Serafinowicz will be voicing the character Pate.

WITCHER 3 LEAD GAMEPLAY DESIGNER AND PRODUCER JOIN ANOMALY DEVS TO START NEW GAME PROJECT 

the #TRENDING

with NowGamer.com's Ryan King



FIRE IWATA



You've seen the dolphins, right? For those of you (un)lucky enough to be on Facebook, and who dare to use it for purposes other than scrolling past endless *Candy Crush* invites, you'll have noticed the dolphins. They're centre-stage in a link circulating Facebook's network that highlights the plight of dolphins being slaughtered off the coast of Denmark, the North Sea being turned crimson red in the name of some barbaric ritual we could never hope to understand.

Except they're not dolphins, they're whales. And it's not Denmark, it's the Faroe Islands. And it's not done for ritual but for food. The whales killed are not an endangered species and the hunt itself has been deemed sustainable by IUCN. The morality and ethics of such an act remains open for debate, even after those facts, but the point is this – people reacted to what they saw without looking beneath the surface, searching for context or pausing for thought. Instead, the day was won by instant reaction. Such is the brave new world of social media.

In case you're wondering why I'm dribbling on about dolphin slaughter in a magazine about games, it's because of Nintendo. Nintendo slashed its Wii U sales forecast for the financial year from nine million to 2.8 million, prompting far too many gamers out there to play armchair CEO, as though "marketing sucks!!1" or "FIRE IWATA" is the magic bullet Nintendo has desperately needed to fire at its problems.



Don't worry, Satori Iwati has it covered, okay?

> Nintendo slashed its Wii U sales forecast from 9 million to 2.8 million, prompting far too many gamers out there to play armchair CEO

The reactions are similar to those inspired by that misleading dolphins link. A lot of kneejerk shouting. A lot of OTT outrage and anger. A lot of the usual need to stay relevant by offering instant opinion without actually giving much thought or consideration to what has occurred or why.

So this isn't about what Nintendo should do to fix its problems. I don't know what goes on behind the scenes at Nintendo and at times, I suspect Nintendo doesn't fully know either. I don't know what Nintendo should do, or perhaps more realistically what Nintendo *can* do, to fix its problems. I haven't run a company before. I play Nintendo games and that's as far as my expertise in this situation goes. It doesn't qualify me to put together any sort of business proposal on how to fix Nintendo.

It's also what stops me from the mindless frothing at the mouth when Nintendo's problems are brought up in various corners of t'internet. It's fair to say there are some widely held assumptions about Nintendo that hold firm – the marketing for Wii U did (and does) indeed suck, regardless of whether it was the name that confused little Johnny's parents or the meek advertising campaign at fault.

It was the wrong console at the wrong time, barely squeezing ahead of PS3 and Xbox 360 when Sony and Microsoft were applying the finishing touches to their next-gen assault. And the lack of games remains a valid concern, having never really been addressed since launch. But please, stop and think before contributing to the endless wailing about Nintendo. What can you actually contribute? Think about how your eyes glaze over when you're watching football and one goal can turn your timid friend into a beered-up Mourinho, shouting which players should be playing and where. Or how those who hated *Celebrity Big Brother* would watch it just so they could tell the world how much they hate it, as though stunning new insight has been revealed about the television taste of the nation. A strong emotional reaction doesn't make it any less of an opinion over actual facts.

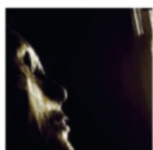
Without any real insight into Nintendo's struggles, all anyone can hope to contribute is more noise. In a world that's already drowning with misleading Facebook outrage, with armchair punditry drowning social media and reaction gifs competing with exclamation marks for attention on forums, there's already plenty of noise out there. As the miffed citizens of Danish coastal towns might suggest, while tending to their injured reputations – sometimes it's worth taking a pause for breath and asking yourself 'why' before going ahead and clicking that 'Post' button.

Ryan King is editor of NowGamer.com

COAST TO COAST
with Gray Nicholson



Screen Burn



When it debuted in the Sony XEL-1 television, OLED (Organic Light-Emitting Diode) seemed like the perfect screen technology for gaming. No motion blur, response times measured not in milliseconds but fractions thereof, impossibly low blacks – just switch a pixel off! – contrast ratios beyond measure, wide viewing angles, and arresting color. Oh, and because it requires no backlight, it's crazy thin. Take my money.

Have you ever actually watched what happens to the detail on an LCD screen when things start moving? Pick an object or textured surface, track it, and waggle the camera around in your game of choice. Two thousand lines of resolution dissolve into a gauzy puddle that can at best describe around 300 lines of information. Unless you're playing mahjong, this is happening all the time.

At a demonstration of 4k or 'Ultra High Definition', the new format with four times the pixels of HD, you'll notice stunning fine detail; you'll also notice the material is either still photography or static video with very little movement – a steak sizzling in a pan – because resolution, which is what 4k brings to the table, still plummets when things move. Adding more isn't the answer. LCD is smeary. Sets currently being sold as "LED" TVs just have white LED lights behind LCD screens. A marketing misnomer. Abandoning these panels is overdue.



By now, shouldn't we be looking at the above image and mocking the quality…?

Where the hell is OLED and why isn't it in my house?

The XEL-1 was just a test, a toe in the electroluminescent water, rather than a serious contender for your new household TV set: an 11-inch screen size, strange mid-def resolution of 960x540 and $2,500 sticker price saw to that. But it put the technology out there, promised a lighting fast gaming future free of blur. Free, in fact, of every compromise imposed by CRT, plasma and LCD. Geometry, brightness, color… The perfect screen. That'll do me, I thought. When they're proper size and normal money. Let's say five years? Well, it's been six. Where the hell is OLED and why isn't it in my house?

It may be in your pocket. Some phones, Walkmans, camera viewfinders and the PS Vita boast OLED screens. Issues on both the production and consumer sides have prevented uptake beyond these miniature examples. Dissuading the buyer are limitations in size, form and resolution: all OLED TVs outside Asia have 55-inch screens, forcing a certain price point, they're all bizarrely curved, for no good reason other than that they can be, and none are Ultra High Def. If you don't want a giant, expensive, bowed screen that's unable to display the newest format, you're not buying OLED today. Trombone glissando.

The worst problem plaguing manufacture is low yield; as many as 90% of screens show imperfections and have to be scrapped. Recouping this expense keeps the price high, with models starting at $9,000. Other technical issues yet to be solved recall the plasma days, with gradual dimming of the blue element over time and evidence on stress tested sets of burn-in, the ghostly lingering image of some bright graphic displayed on screen for too long. Like a HUD. Gamers fear the burn-in.

Vita players will have discovered that the 'no motion blur' claim isn't true in all cases, either. Cheaper OLED displays still show blur, which is not a great advert for the new tech. Those mental high-end flagship models like LG's 55EA9800 show none, keeping the dream alive of a rock solid game world. I still believe.

Though the concave screen thing can presumably be rectified when consumers make it clear that, no matter how eye-catching it is in a shop, they don't want to view all material on a warped surface like the inside of Iron Man's helmet, the other hindrances keeping OLED from us are without such immediate solutions. The executive VP of Samsung's TV department admitted at this year's CES that manufacturing problems are indeed holding up the TV revolution, putting affordable mass production screens another – no! – three or four years away. But *GTA VI* is going to look absolutely *incredible*.

Gray Nicholson is a former videogames journalist who now resides in America, acknowledging his roots as he sees fit



Five Things About
South Park: The Stick Of Truth

Trey Parker and Matt Stone have been vocal about their disdain for games released under the *South Park* banner for a while – so the duo set out to make their own game. After years of delays, trouble with publishers and trouble with developers, the game is finally upon us, so we've taken the time to look at five things the title is promising…

1 The definitive South Park experience…
Unlike other *South Park* games, *The Stick Of Truth* has had direct involvement from Trey and Matt, who actually approached Obsidian Entertainment themselves to pitch the game. Obsidian then proved it could run the game with a traditional *South Park* aesthetic. With the real voices, the real writers and the real creative minds powering the project, *The Stick Of Truth* will be the definitive *South Park* game.

2 Entirely fictional characters and events…
You name a character that's been in *South Park*, and we guarantee they'll make an appearance in *The Stick Of Truth*. In our short hands-on we got to meet Al Gore, Tuong Lu Kim (proprietor of City Wok), Officer Barbrady, Jimbo, Ned and more. Whether as NPCs or allies in battle, the extensive *South Park* cast will be present, somewhere and somehow.

3 Coarse humour…
It wouldn't be a product of South Park Studios without fart jokes, poo references, swearing and offensive behaviour. The very first thing we did after booting up the game was find a toilet, where we were given the option to 'mash A to poo'. After finishing, we reached into the bowl and grabbed a 'shit nugget' – an item we later used in battle to inflict our enemy with the Grossed Out status effect.

4 Scathing satire…
We have to commend the way *The Stick Of Truth* plays with the traditional menus and interfaces of the RPG. The whole UI satirises the nuances of social media whilst being practical and accessible; from receiving pissed-off messages from your friends to the customisation screen – everything is presented within an pseudo-Facebook framework.

5 Bloody violence…
The best thing about Obsidian adopting the rubbish animation the series is known for is the freedom it gives the team to be brutal – we were relieved to see the timing and pacing of the show alive and well in the game. We spent some time beating up Clyde, and the way his face turned puffy as we wailed on him was inspired. Obsidian knows how anarchic and violent the typical *South Park* fan will want to be, and it caters for them completely.



The Devil Makes Work For Idle Thumbs

The Home Console Vs. The Handheld

We're living in an age where there is just as much variety on handheld gaming devices as there is on the traditional console. It used to be that handhelds were pared down versions of their more powerful console cousins, but now the tides are turning

I keep trying to get into handheld games, but when it comes down to it, if I can play a game on my big TV I'll do that instead.
@jasonalmenas, Twitter

I play my 3DS XL on the commute. My PS3 mainly gets used as a blu-ray player these days (and for online/other gaming – I use a PC).
@MarkGregory7, Twitter

Right now, I prefer handheld. The quality of games recently has just been outstanding. Though I play them at home and rarely on the move.
@cccccclarence, Twitter

It depends – handheld is perfect for pick up and play and short bursts of fun. Consoles are for all-nighters and gaming marathons!
@TriTopsGaming, Twitter

I definitely prefer full consoles. Handhelds just can't compete. This is especially true the older I get – plus handheld screens are just so tiny!
@MrRichardMoran, Twitter

No real preferences here, but time constraints during the week mean I'm playing mostly on handhelds, while my consoles (and myself) are always waiting for the next weekend.
Joel Hartmann, Facebook

I like my larger console games on my handhelds. See: *Killzone Mercenary*, Remote Play, *Uncharted*, etc. Easier with kids. Also: *Monster Hunter* forever!
@BenSpike, Twitter

When handhelds do it right (short games that use the hardware well) it's great. I'm horribly addicted to *OlliOlli*, though.
@Peoww, Twitter

50/50 for me, I reckon. My 3DS and Vita are ideal when at work, but also love the big TV screen. Couldn't be without any really.
@JetArtois, Twitter

WHY I ...

The Chaos Engine

DENNIS WEDIN, DENNATON GAMES

I have to say The Chaos Engine *on Amiga because I just bought it again on eBay and I'm planning to play it again over the weekend. I think it's one of the best games ever made and it was a big inspiration on how I animated the characters in* Hotline Miami*. What I remember was playing with my friend, who was a fucking bastard and took all the money every time we played. It's that type of competitive game and he knew it inside out and I wasn't very good. He'd always take all the secrets and money and leave me to die. Not a great friend. But it was a great game and The Bitmap Brothers are one of my favourite game developers of all time.*





"It was a big inspiration on how I animated the characters in Hotline Miami"

DENNIS WEDIN, DENNATON GAMES

Tactical Espionage Reactions

We flew out to Nasu, Japan to chat to Hideo Kojima, the man that splits opinion, about his iconic series and get hands-on with his latest project Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes



Whether you like Hideo Kojima and his work or not, you have to agree that the man has vision. An industry veteran, Kojima wrote, directed and designed his first game back in 1987. The game was *Metal Gear*, an overhead action adventure that is widely credited as being the antecedent of the stealth game as we know it. The series has evolved with the industry itself, punctuating the gaming timeline with games that always seem to take full advantage of the hardware available, making the most of the huge budgets granted by publisher Konami.

"We've seen a phenomenon around the world," says Kojima as we sit down with him, fresh from our playthrough of *Ground Zeroes*. "Young people are losing interest in high-end games and focusing on mobile and social titles, especially in Japan. I wanted to show people that Japanese high-end games are still worth playing and that big Japanese games still have a future." It's an admirable vision, and one that we think informs the game's curious pace – the main thing that caught us off-guard about *Ground Zeroes* was its length.

Think of *Ground Zeroes* as the Tanker mission from *Metal Gear Solid 2* – it's an elaborate preamble, a tutorial-cum-prologue that teaches you exactly how this new, open world *Metal Gear Solid* works. If Kojima was concerned about waning concentration spans of gamers, it shows – this is a game that suits the mobile generation; if you want to complete the main story in 90 minutes, you can. Before we played the game through, we were cynical – we thought that Konami was just keen to extract as much cash from its audience as possible, but Kojima assured us the game's partitioning was done with no one but the end-user in mind. "I'll be honest, [splitting *MGSV* up] wasn't necessarily a strategic move. *The Phantom Pain* is roughly 200 times bigger than *Ground Zeroes*. A game that big wouldn't be ready for next-gen launch windows, and we didn't have any Japanese titles that would be available. At that time, the *Ground Zeroes* portion was almost complete and a lot of fans were asking for a prologue, so that's the decision we came to. That was the reasoning behind the move."

> "I wanted to show people that Japanese high-end games are still worth playing and that big Japanese games still have a future"

It feels distinctly more refined than previous entries in the series – even the cutscenes have been dialed back; there are only two in the whole game, bookending the narrative. For a series that's as infamously obsessed with cinematics as *Metal Gear* is, this comes as a shock. Even the cutscenes that made it into the final product feel different – it seems Kojima has taken his cues from the current filmmaking trend of using lingering steady-cam shots to follow characters around – a departure »

» from the more erratic cuts that once defined *Metal Gear*. "Ideally, I wanted to create a game where all the cutscenes are one camera shot," explains Kojima, "and the camera moves from the gameplay to the cutscene and back, seamlessly. So really, it's only one camera through the entire game." This considered pacing and unbroken perspective grants the game something other *Metal Gear* titles have lacked – a player-directed pace. It still has the picture-house quality of previous *Metal Gear* games, but it's more thematic in *Ground Zeroes*; Kojima isn't ramming his filmic influences down your throat this time.

■ Camp Omega is full of varied weaponry that Big Boss can pilfer – our favourite find was a rocket launcher tucked away in a nest of guards. Once in our possession, we rained fiery hell down on our opponents.

The complete *Metal Gear Solid V* package actually follows on from *MGS3: Peace Walker* (confusingly enough), and there's a handy catch-up option in the game's main menu that will get new players up to speed with the winding, convoluted story thus far. "I changed the method of storytelling this time, though" Kojima explains to



explore Camp Omega. Supporting ally Miller can be contacted at the press of a button, and will aid Snake with recon data – telling him what's nearby and what can be completed. It seems Kojima is taking his cues from titles like *BioShock* or *Borderlands* – the aim is to keep the player engaged, letting the user retain their agency at all times. "The way we used to do things, we might have had a ten-minute cutscene telling you what kind of a character Chico is, something that would make the player want to go rescue them," explains Kojima. "Now, that background information is portrayed through the game itself, or the audio diaries which we brought back from *Peace Walker*. Even if players don't know the characters, telling them to go rescue this young boy and girl will give an emotional reaction they can relate to. I didn't want to force this

"I WANTED TO CREATE A GAME WHERE ALL THE CUTSCENES ARE ONE CAMERA SHOT, AND THE CAMERA MOVES FROM GAMEPLAY TO CUTSCENE SEAMLESSLY"

us. "For people who played *Peace Walker*, players who know Chico and Paz will find it easier to relate to them. However, if it's people who haven't played *Peace Walker*, they will get a different emotional reaction, and this was an intentional decision on my part." This is a chancy strategy – one that risks alienating new players if they can't penetrate the complex storyline, or excluding veteran players. "I wanted to make a game that, depending on the background info and experience the player has, will feel like something different. I wanted to have freedom on that part and intentionally set out to create *Ground Zeroes* that way."

Exposition and story flourishes are dealt with in-game, audio logs and dialogue playing over the radio as you

■ Getting up close and personal with enemies allows for some excellent CQC – if you're not too violently inclined, you can choose to merely knock the guards out. We preferred snapping their necks like chickens, though.



Original Cinema

It could be argued that the *Metal Gear Solid* series is the closest games have come to true interactive cinema – *MGS4: Guns Of The Patriots* managed to rack up an incredible eight hours of cutscene content throughout its main narrative. Perhaps this is because Kojima himself is a massive film nut – even Snake and Otocon's real names (David and Hal) hail from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey.* Kojima has listed his 15 most influential films – and we're pleased to see they're as diverse and comprehensive as the *Metal Gear* games.

THE GUNS OF NAVARONE
THE GREAT ESCAPE
GOLDFINGER
2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY
PLANET OF THE APES (ORIGINAL WORK)
THE DEER HUNTER
DAWN OF THE DEAD
FULL METAL JACKET
PREDATOR
DIE HARD
HEAT
BLACK HAWK DOWN
CHILDREN OF MEN
THE BOURNE SERIES
007 CASINO ROYALE

information into cutscenes." This approach is noticeable – never is control wrested away from you; Kojima's old reliance on the cutscene is fading – but when he *does* include them, he certainly makes a point of it.

The opening cinematic is as off the wall as you'd expect, and sets the tone for the game succinctly and masterfully. The final scene is more harrowing, a full exploration of how cinematographic you can be in a videogame – a scene that pushes the boundaries of what games can (and will) get away with. Kojima brings you into *Ground Zeroes* with a cinematic vignette, and he takes you out with one. It's an incredibly intelligent and self-aware framework, one that says 'this is the shape of Metal Gear now. This is where we're going.' It's clear Kojima is keen to change the paradigm that *Metal Gear Solid* operates on, then.

that explore the different mechanics at play in *Ground Zeroes* (if you complete all of them, there's a tasty reward on offer, too). There are your standard collectibles dotted around, too – there are nine XOF badges, a series of audiotapes and plenty of guardsmen's conversations to eavesdrop on. It's difficult to give an estimation of full playtime, but we're confident saying the full experience will take you over eight hours, easily.

The main mission sees you dropped into the outskirts of an American blacksite in Cuba – Camp Omega – tasked with extracting Cipher agent Paz and child warrior, Chico. That's literally it – that's all your setup. Do you go in all guns blazing? Do you sneak in on the back of a military van? Do you try and penetrate the electrified fence? It's your call. Camp Omega becomes Big Boss' own personal playground – the way the map is designed makes it possible to approach any objective or target in a variety of ways.

> "People who haven't played Peace Walker will get a different emotional reaction from Ground Zeroes, and this was an intentional decision on my part"

This applies particularly to the approach *Ground Zeroes* takes to its central mission – we finished the game in just under 90 minutes. For a boxed release that's going to cost you £40 on PS4/Xbox One, initially you might think that's ridiculous. Once we finished and exited to the menu, though, we saw our overall completion rested at a meagre 9% – *Ground Zeroes* is not a game that's necessarily long, but it certainly is wide.

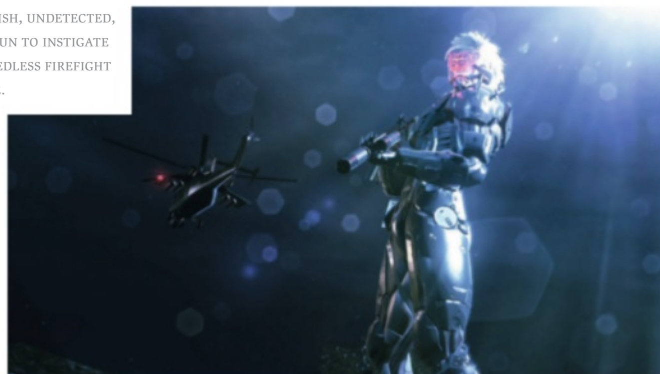
Players that might want to complete the main mission undetected, or that want to kill everyone, will have the option to do either. Completionists have a series of five 'side ops' to finish – each taking between 30-45 minutes –

It all feels very *Metal Gear*, still – Big Boss walks around like he owns the place, interacting with every object as he goes: you can stick to cover and poke your head around corners, hop over obstacles and barriers, mount enemy vehicles – do pretty much as you please. Big Boss is a veteran of many wars – he's powerful, deadly and takes no nonsense from anyone. Playing as him again, you can feel that – the control scheme is largely built around the console rerelease of *Peace Walker*, with a few additional flairs. Hitting Square/X now causes Snake to dodge, a simple manoeuvre that saved our skin more than we could have predicted – sit »

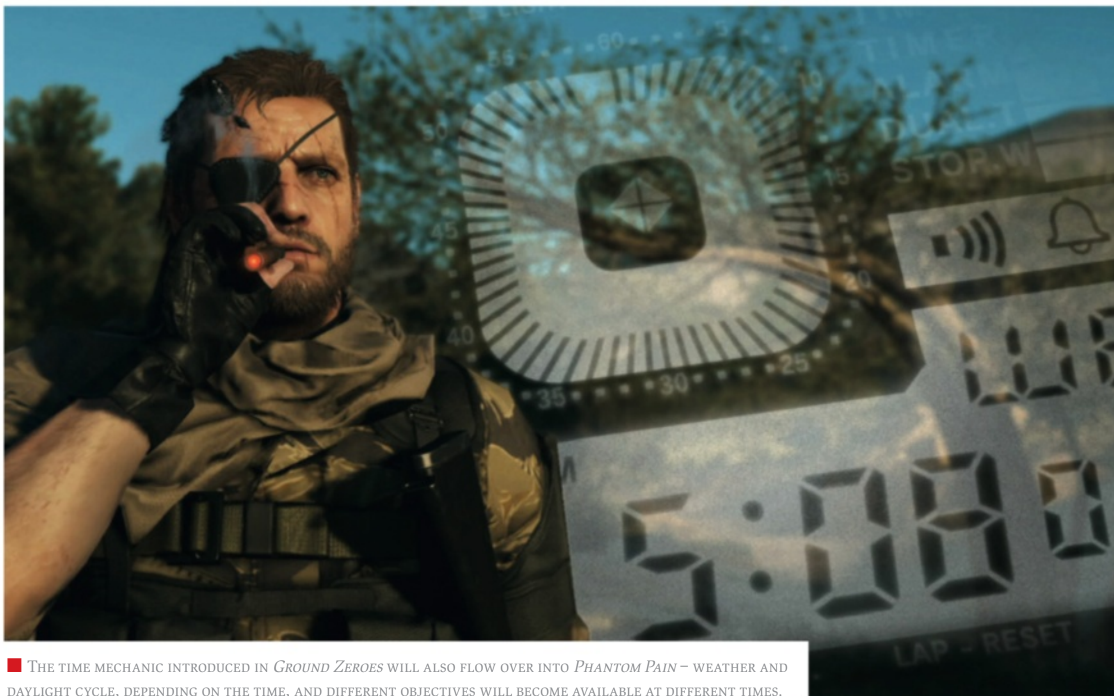








The whole of Camp Omega is yours for the taking – while it is possible to stealth your way from start to finish, undetected, it is undeniably fun to instigate a massive and needless firefight from time to time.



The time mechanic introduced in *Ground Zeroes* will also flow over into *Phantom Pain* – weather and daylight cycle, depending on the time, and different objectives will become available at different times.

down with the game for a few hours and you'll wonder how the game ever worked without it. Hitting the D-pad will equip different weapons, or items and the other face buttons let you reload or interact with your environment.

Due to the sandbox design of the game, more emphasis than ever before is put on thinking tactically – binoculars, of course, make a return and help you scope out your path through the enemy encampment, tagging enemies as you go (think *Splinter Cell* or *Far Cry 3*). There were complaints being aired that this takes away from what *Metal Gear* is, that Kojima is being influenced too much by Western developers. After playing the game, we have to say that the tagging system not only works – it's wholly necessary. In an open world, you can so easily lose track of an enemy's location and if you've spent ten minutes planning a way around someone, only to have them sneak up on you out of nowhere, the game would get frustrating. *Ground Zeroes* hits upon a good balance with the tagging mechanic – if an enemy strays too far from your field of vision, they'll vanish from your radar: it's a tool that makes the game function as it should.

It helps that everything is brought to life with Konami's own FOX Engine. This is the best looking game we've seen run on the PS4 – it's clear Konami has the tools at its disposal to make the most of the hardware. This is the closest we've seen a game come to photorealism – everything is captured and rendered in ridiculous detail, even down to how fabric behaves in the delicate desert winds that brush through the camp. *Ground Zeroes* feels like a graphical entrée for *The Phantom Pain* – a delicious taster of what's to come; every now and then a rainstorm will pass over the camp, and the water effects are jaw-dropping. It's a preview of the full, dynamic weather system that's going to come in with *The Phantom Pain* – yet more proof that Kojima knows what he's doing with an open world. "Our first aim for our next game was to make an open world stealth game in the FOX Engine," explains Kojima when we asked him about the development process for next-gen consoles. "We started making that for that game for [Xbox 360 and PS3], and once the next-gen systems came in, we started brushing it up so it could better fit the next-gen consoles."

"We could get Kiefer's voice and facial capture but not his motion capture. Moving forward, we want to get everything"



This means that the difference between the two generational releases isn't actually that vast – yes, the Xbox One/PS4 versions look nicer, but both generations are very much the same game. The graphics are shinier, the animations smoother and the framerate higher on next-gen, but everything still looks and acts the same. Snake's movements haven't actually been motion captured, but you wouldn't be able to tell – the way he ducks and dives and rolls around is frighteningly realistic. Looking at the full performance Kiefer Sutherland puts in here, it's clear why David Hayter was replaced. "I wanted to aim for having one actor perform every aspect of the character," Kojima explains to us. "For [*Ground Zeroes*], we could get Kiefer's voice and facial capture but unfortunately not his motion capture. Moving forward for [*The Phantom Pain*], we want to get everything,

The Extended Universe

While most notorious for his work on the *Metal Gear Solid* series, Kojima has had an extensive and diverse career elsewhere in the games industry. Kojima acts as Vice President of Konami Digital Entertainment, heads up his own studio (Kojima Productions) and has been involved with games outside of the *Metal Gear* franchise:

Zone of the Enders

Under Kojima's recommendation, *Zone Of The Enders* was given its catchy techno-pop soundtrack. Series director Noriaki Okamura states the franchise wouldn't be the same without Kojima's assistance.

Boktai

A series of Game Boy Advance games aimed at a younger audience than other Kojima projects, *Boktai* focused on vampires, solar flares, big guns and the moon. It all still sounds very Kojima, right?

Castlevania: Lords of Shadow

The gritty, blood-laden extension of the *Castlevania* franchise was published by Konami, with Kojima acting as executive producer.

Super Smash Bros. Brawl

A little known fact – Kojima actually designed the Shadow Moses Island stage that acted as Snake's home stage.



METAL GEAR SOLID TIMELINE

Kojima has admitted that he embarked on the Metal Gear journey with no set destination in mind. While this creative approach has made Metal Gear the winding, complex beast that we all know and love, or perhaps just know, it's certainly made for a confusing chronology…



1964 MGS3: SNAKE EATER

CIA agent Naked Snake is guided by The Boss as he hunts for a Soviet weapons designer, Sokolov. The mission's compromised when The Boss defects. Thus begins Operation Snake Eater – Naked Snake works to rectify the errors of the previous mission. Eventually successful, he's awarded the title Big Boss, which he spurns.



1970 MGS: PORTABLE OPS

Big Boss' former FOX Unit goes rogue, rebelling against the CIA. FOX captures Big Boss and tortures him, attempting to find the location of lost war money. Boss escapes, and exacts revenge on the FOX Unit. Big Boss then sets up Foxhound, taking over the US government.



1974 MGS: PEACE WALKER

Big Boss (now simply Snake) and his merc group MSF shuts down an illegal AI weapons programme. Snake decides to build his own Metal Gear: Zeke, with peacekeeping intentions in mind. Due to interference from Paz – a University of Peace student – Snake destroys Zeke.



1975 MGSV: GROUND ZEROES

Snake hunts Paz to an American military camp, located on Cuban soil, with the intent of extracting Paz and Chico – a child soldier. Something goes badly wrong and XOF, under the command of Skull Face, critically wounds Snake after attacking MSF's HQ.



1984 MGSV: THE PHANTOM PAIN

Comatose since 1975, Snake awakens with his left arm missing and heavy shrapnel wounds. Snake escapes the hospital and sets up the Diamond Dogs – a new merc group. Changing his name to Punished Snake, he travels to Afghanistan to hunt down those who hospitalised him.



2005 METAL GEAR SOLID

FOXHOUND goes rogue, and its leader – Liquid Snake – takes over a nuclear facility on Shadow Moses Island, demanding Big Boss' comatose body. Solid Snake, a Big Boss clone, infiltrates the facility and wipes out Foxhound. Atop Metal Gear Rex, Solid defeats Liquid and escapes with former hostage Meryl. Ocelot escapes and sells Metal Gear plans worldwide.



2007 MGS2: SONS OF LIBERTY (TANKER)

Snake sneaks onto a cargo ship to recon a suspected Metal Gear shipment and once again clashes with Ocelot. Ocelot steals the Metal Gear and implicates Solid as the perpetrator. Snake fakes his own death.



2009 MGS2: SONS OF LIBERTY (BIG SHELL)

Solidus Snake (acting president of the US) invades Big Shell – a nuclear weapon (Arsenal Gear) disguised as a facility cleaning up the tanker's mess. Raiden is called in to deal with the situation, but it turns out it was a simulation emulating Shadow Moses to see if a soldier like Solid Snake could be replicated. Raiden eventually kills Solidus, but Ocelot runs off (again) with The Patriots' AI core.



2014 MGS4: GUNS OF THE PATRIOTS

The world has gone to war. Solid Snake is now Old Snake, and Ocelot manages to kill everyone's soldiers but his own with nanomachines. Snake tracks Ocelot down but he escapes again, back to Shadow Moses. Snake teams up with Raiden and a Metal Gear battle ensues, with Ocelot escaping. Again. Later, Ocelot finally dies, Big Boss wakes up and destroys every trace of The Patriots and Snake lives happily ever after.





The synergy between the voice actors is palpable – Big Boss is the only character whose actor (Hayter) hasn't reprised his role; everyone else comes back stronger and better than they ever have been before.

» movement, voice and face all together. We want one single human to get his voice, face and motion in the game and become the character."

Sutherland seems to fully understand the role – there's a lot of pressure on him to live up to Hayter's iconic Snake – but Sutherland has more than enough experience to prove himself the right man for the job. His whole performance is considered, world-weary, affected. At first, you *will* hear Jack Bauer coming through, but once you've settled in, you'll be listening to Snake as you always have done. It's not just Sutherland's dulcet tones that make the game a pleasure to the ears, either; the whole cast performs admirably, and the game is brimming with enough talent to rival a triple-A Hollywood blockbuster. The soundtrack is typically *Metal Gear* – understated but suitable, providing atmosphere but not ever intrusive enough to become a distraction. There are also some recurring sound effects that will bring a smile to the face of anyone that's been playing a *Metal Gear Solid* for a while – it's this kind of attention to detail that allays any of our worries that *Metal Gear* was losing sight of its much-loved roots.

And that was our biggest fear with this game – *Metal Gear Solid* is a series widely stated to be the father of the stealth genre, and we thought the move to an open world would utterly undermine everything the series has worked towards. We thought stealth wouldn't really work without the claustrophobic inhibitors that have defined the genre thus far, but after playing through *Ground Zeroes*, start to finish, we've decided that *Metal Gear Solid* is once again acting as the progenitor to a new sub-genre – the sandbox stealth game. Kojima is well aware that people may not be fully sold on the idea, but it's his vision – his artistic offering to the world. "I like creating things," he tells us, "I love doing so in any form. It's why I'm thinking of starting cooking lessons – I'm not sure if anyone will eat what I cook, though!" Kojima would always rather innovate than stagnate, and we're pleased to see that life philosophy extends even beyond his game-making. Hopefully with all it's different ingredients, though, *Ground Zeroes* will have what it takes to be a recipe for success.



"I like creating things… It's why I'm thinking of starting cooking lessons – I'm not sure if anyone will eat what I cook, though!"





With the game running on the PS4, the particle effects and explosion renders look stunning – we enjoyed blowing stuff up just to see what the processing power of the PS4 could do to it.



10 THINGS WE KNOW ABOUT METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN

HAVING PLAYED GROUND ZEROES FROM START TO FINISH, WE LOOK AHEAD TO THE MAIN ATTRACTION AND ANALYSE WHAT TO EXPECT FROM KOJIMA'S MAGNUM OPUS

IT'S SET SEVEN YEARS AFTER GROUND ZEROES

1 While *Ground Zeroes*' campaign brevity has been a contentious issue leading up to its release, the prologue's tightly constructed story (involving *Peace Walker*'s Paz and Chico) ties directly into the themes of *The Phantom Pain*. Kojima has stated that *The Phantom Pain* will pick up events seven years later in 1984.

PHANTOM PAIN IS A WAR STORY

2 Well, not in a literal sense – Kojima has already explored this territory comprehensively in MGS4. Instead, *The Phantom Pain* will be more of a character study on the psychological and human impact that war has on an individual, depicting the loss (physically and mentally) of those that survive such atrocities.

IT'S THE BIGGEST METAL GEAR EVER

3 *Ground Zeroes* is just a mere taste of what players can expect in *The Phantom Pain*, certainly when it comes down to size of both the story and world that they are able to explore. Kojima confirmed to **games™** that *The Phantom Pain* weighs in at around 200 times bigger than *Ground Zeroes*.

COMPLETING GROUND ZEROES IS AN ADVANTAGE

4 While the two games will be released quite some time apart (see point 10), there's still going to be substantial connective tissue between *Ground Zeroes* and *The Phantom Pain*. One of the most notable examples is the transferal of progress from the prologue over to the main game, but details on what will make the leap has yet to be confirmed.

THE LEVEL DESIGN IS HUGE

5 One of the most impressive aspects of *Ground Zeroes* is the vast open-world design of its setting, however *The Phantom Pain* doesn't quite follow the same design. Instead, it'll be several explorable districts. The Afghanistan areas alone presents some incredible draw distance, which should give you some idea of the scale and ambition of *Metal Gear Solid V*.

IT'S A LIVING WORLD

6 The E3 trailer for *Metal Gear Solid V* had a certain *Red Dead Redemption* quality to it and Kojima has clearly been taking notes in terms of crafting a tangible and emergent world to explore. Expect to find plenty of wildlife (goats, sheep, cows, etc.) scattered across the scenery feeding into the authenticity of the landscape.





EXPANDING BASES

7 Kojima hasn't gone into much detail about the expansion to bases in *The Phantom Pain*, but we're told that they will be much more interactive than they have been in previous *Metal Gear* games. There will be an element of customisation and you'll be able to jump online and visit other people's bases, which we're intrigued by.

EXPANSION OF STEALTH

8 A feature we've seen for quite a while is how stealth will be significantly expanded upon (more so than in *Ground Zeroes*), tying into other new features in *The Phantom Pain*. The best example we've seen is how Snake can lean off the side of a horse to avoid detection, all part of *Metal Gear Solid V*'s 'new breed of stealth'.

RECRUIT SOLDIERS

9 Unlike in *Ground Zeroes*, you'll be able to recruit soldiers in *The Phantom Pain*. This is done via Fulton recovery, which has been used in previous *Metal Gear Solid* titles to extract troops from the battlezone. It's unclear exactly how this will expand the gameplay and it's thought this feature might tie into your interactions within *Ground Zeroes*.

DON'T EXPECT IT THIS YEAR

10 No release date has yet been confirmed for *The Phantom Pain* yet, but given the sheer scope of Kojima's vision and the actual size of the game compared to *Ground Zeroes*, it's unlikely that it'll arrive in 2014. We're expecting *The Phantom Pain* to arrive this time next year.



"People get so immersed in getting off the beaten path and just playing with those systems, because it really is just endless"

MICHAEL DE PLATER MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS

High-ranking enemies drop Runes when killed. These can upgrade your weapons, while also inscribing a unique symbol belonging to that enemy onto the blade itself. You can build the legend of your weapon gradually as you battle tougher enemies.

Middle-earth: Shadow Of Mordor

CONCEPT A mature take on the *Lord Of The Rings* licence that throws players into an open-world Mordor to exact revenge on the Orc population.

One does not simply walk into Mordor

There's an inherent problem with setting your game within one of the most recognisable fantasy worlds in contemporary fiction. Despite the legion of fans anxiously cloying for the next slice of the multimedia pie, there's a perceptible stigma still attached to licensed products that often manifests itself in pessimistic preconceived notions before the public has even seen so much as a snippet of in-game footage.

Monolith Productions isn't unversed in dealing with this sort of congruent maelstrom of grousing, enthusiasm and outright dismissal, having a versatile track record of successful virtual adaptions of notable popular licences – *Batman*, *The Matrix* and *Aliens Versus Predator*. Yet, with *Middle-earth: Shadow Of Mordor*, the challenge isn't so much crafting a reverential title set within JRR Tolkien's world of hobbits, elves and orcs to appease fans, but to adapt it in a way that differentiates it from what has come before.

For three years the developer has been building an action-adventure title that delves into the mature themes of Tolkien's world. But blood and violence isn't the aim. Instead, the focus here is to craft systems and innovations that wouldn't be uncommon in some of the biggest triple-a titles of the year, elevating *Shadow Of Mordor* above its licensed brethren.

"We definitely started with the goal of 'How ambitious can we be?'," design director Michael de Plater tells **games™** after presenting a demonstration of the game in action. "If you're going to make a game it's got to be the best game it can be within its own right. And that's something [watching] interviews with Peter Jackson [revealed] was the philosophy of the films as well. That was very inspirational. Plus joining Warner Bros., the absolute model of the best possible way to approach beloved and great IP was that model of *Batman: Arkham Asylum*. It's absolutely not the movie game of Chris Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, it's *Arkham Asylum* – once again making the best possible game they could."

It's an apposite comparison. Before Rocksteady could establish the *Arkham* brand as one of the foremost action franchises, it had to shuck its association with both the cinematic adaption by Christopher Nolan and previous attempts at bringing the world to life in the videogame medium. For *Arkham*, this meant focusing its gameplay specifically around Batman's personality – particularly his incisive detective skills and pugilistic prowess. For *Shadow Of Mordor*, it's the Ring of Power itself and its ability to completely transfigure those that grasp its power.

/// "A criticism I've read in places of Tolkien's work is 'Well, these are just black and white stories of good and evil' – but there's so much more to them than that," de Plater enthuses. "There are these really fascinating characters, like Boromir and like Saruman, like Gollum and Denethor and even going back to *The Silmarillion* with the elves and the kin slayings – it's actually a lot more nuanced, a lot more deep and a lot more mythic than a lot of people think. And taking someone like Boromir – who wanted to take the ring and use the weapon of the enemy against him – we thought what that would have meant. So those kind of 'what if' scenarios and characters were a huge inspiration."

Taking place between the events of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord Of The Rings*, players are thrust behind the Black Gate of Mordor as Sauron's army begins to amass its strength.

"Sauron's return is obviously a big deal but if you're going to pursue power and fight against Sauron using his own weapons – which are fear, domination and seeing into the unseen – if you're going to fight fire with fire, then there's going to be consequences for the character in doing that," adds de Plater.

Indeed, and Talion is the nomad – resurrected after being slain alongside his mentor, wife and son by Sauron's forces – on a quest for revenge, who inherits a range of Wraith abilities that enable him to uniquely

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One
Origin: US
Publisher: WB Games
Developer: Monolith Productions
Release: TBA 2014
Genre: Action/adventure
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Having worked on a string of successful PC titles through the late Nineties, Monolith Productions was acquired by Warner Bros. in 2004 and worked on some of its most notable titles. A balance between licensed fare and new IP, Monolith has proven its credentials with consistent quality and a rare versatility.

Developer History

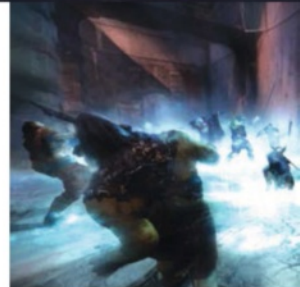
Guardians Of Middle-earth
2012 [Multi]
Condemned: Criminal Origins
2005 [PC, Xbox 360]
F.E.A.R.
2005 [Multi]
Shogo: Mobile Armor Division
1998 [Multi]

High Point

A masterclass in suspense, *F.E.A.R.* was both a sterling first-person shooter and an unrelenting ghost train that rattled players until its closing credits.







Above: The map of Mordor is pretty sizeable. Districts become unlocked as you activate light towers around the world, which then reveal items and locations that can be explored and discovered by the player. Right: While Ratbag was sent on an assassination mission we witnessed, we've been told that events can play out without Talion actually being present at the scene. Multiple events can be scheduled to occur around Mordor, which will take place once in-game time passes.

interact with the world. We're shown a pre-recorded demo in which Talion is trailing an orc by the name of Ratbag. With enhanced strength and speed, Talion is able to traverse the environment in parkour fashion, scaling stone structures and furtively navigating across suspended wires to stalk enemies scattered around the scenery (those *Assassin's Creed* comparisons *are* quite valid). But using his Wraith powers he's able to look into the Unseen World (the same mist-swirling netherworld that Frodo witnessed when wearing the Ring), revealing locations of key enemies and other significant articles in the world. Finding the Uruk captain promptly, Talion drops into the arena and butchers all in his way before capturing his target. It's here that Talion uses Domination over Ratbag; the enemy, now petrified, and yields completely under Talion's will.

A few options appear here: do you execute him, turn him into a spy, sacrifice him or task him with assassinating his boss? It's the last option that Talion chooses, reconvening some time later at a derelict Gondorian ruin where Ratbag is gathered alongside a crowd of orckind ready to gain orders from the warchief Orthog. Surveying the scene using his Wraith powers, enemies marked with a white hand reveal that half the assembled throng are under Talion's command. Ratbag botches his assassination attempt, which causes an almighty skirmish to take place and Orthog emerges from the crowd towards Talion. Here de Plater points out that the enemy's barbed words highlight events from the protagonist's previous encounter with the enemy.

/// It's here that **games™** is first given a look at Monolith's novel Nemesis system. Talion's quest is to find the three Black Captains of Sauron, but before he can reach them he'll have to fight his way through the orc hierarchy – an emergent system that reacts directly to the player's actions. In a larger live demonstration, Talion dominates an orc and uses it to reveal more information on other characters within the area. A menu option called Sauron's Army enables the player to gain an overview of enemies, analysing the procedurally generated bosses and their place in the hierarchy. Each has various strengths and weaknesses, some having traits bespoke to their class (for instance, hatred is unique to captains – a captain who hates infighting will gain strength if this occurs in your presence), while others like fear are common across all enemies.

More interesting is how even the lowliest grunt has the potential to rise among the ranks. During a routine skirmish, Talion is cut down by a random orc soldier, who then gains notoriety and enters the hierarchy. But, rather than a checkpoint restart, Talion is resurrected, the passage of time having moved on within the game, which opens up a new set of objectives – Talion can hunt down his killer for revenge. If that encounter once again proves unsuccessful for the player, the orc continues to level up, embark on missions and rise among the ranks to the point where he can challenge his superiors for ranking.

"I think the place it came from, and this will reveal my geekiness, but it really came from pen and paper RPGs," de Plater reveals. "When you're playing those games, the characters that you meet on the fly that the dungeon master has to improvise would often be the most memorable characters and the ones you really cared about. If you let players create their own stories out of meaningful interactions to you – because [an orc] escaped and got away or killed the guy you were after – it becomes so much more meaningful.

> "We definitely started with the goal of 'How ambitious can we be?'"
>
> MICHAEL DE PLATER MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS

"The other place it came from was sports games," he continues. "In terms of telling an interactive narrative – having grudges and rematches – time always goes forward. If you play game three of the season and lose you still play game four, keeping things moving forward. And there's that system of having the players with attributes and building them as characters… but trying to bring that level of procedural play to an action-adventure title."

There's plenty more going on in *Shadow Of Mordor* outside of the Nemesis system. It'll be interesting to see how Christian Cantamessa (lead writer and designer on *Red Dead Redemption*) will bring his brand of humour and political musings to the story, while there's promise in the individual weapon and ability skill trees to further personalise your journey. Boasting such sprawling systems, it's easy to get lost in Midde-earth.

"That's one of the struggles we've had in playtests," concludes de Plater. "People get so immersed in getting off the beaten path and just playing with those systems, because it really is just endless."

It's fair to say *Shadow of Mordor* has not only established itself as a unique interpretation of the beloved fiction, but also as something unique in the genre.



Above: Wraith abilities have limited uses but can be recharged by draining orcs of life, keeping the brutal supernatural killing moves going.

FAMILIAR FACES

WHILE SHADOW OF MORDOR is doing its utmost to strike its own tone within Tolkien's world, that's not to say there's not room for the odd appearance from the source material's most memorable characters. Gollum has been confirmed to appear – in keeping with the original novel, Gollum is captured and questioned about the Ring's location – and design director Michael de Plater confirms that other characters in the region of Mordor are more likely to appear than those hailing from The Shire: "I think that's fair to say," he says, before revealing that while the game is set in Middle-earth's darker days, it doesn't rule out some surprise cameos to add levity. "The roles of some of the characters you meet and some of those stories are there to lighten things up."





■ Left: We've played a few *The Lord Of The Rings* games in our time, but this is the first to have a button prompt to 'shank' enemies. Monolith is certainly earning that adult PEGI rating. Below: Orcs each have their own distinct personalities, appearance and dialogue. We happened across Folgum Rage-Mind, who could be drawn out of hiding through embarrassment – achieved by terrorising his supporters enough to flee his stronghold.





STRONG FANTASY VIOLENCE

"THE FILMS ARE actually really visceral," defends design director Michael de Plater when we question *Middle-earth: Shadow Of Mordor*'s penchant for grisly violence, before talking about the character feuds that spawn the cinematic adaptations' more brutal showdowns. "One of the things that I really loved that was added by Peter Jackson was Lurtz. His fight with Aragorn is awesome. Obviously Azog and Thorin in *The Hobbit* as well and their grudge match. They are very visceral match-ups, so it was important to capture that. Azog decapitates Thorin's dad and then gets his arm severed. So they're very physical and we wanted to capture that."

A KNIGHT'S ARSENAL

COMBO GUN: Dual-fire rifle/shotgun that can cut down individual targets at medium range, as well as temporarily stun groups at short range with a paralysing shockwave. The most basic of *The Order*'s weapons.

THERMITE RIFLE: Functioning like napalm, the Thermite Rifle shoots a cloud of metal confetti into the air and then sends a flare through it to create a shower of molten metal.

ARC GUN: Very much emblematic of *The Order*'s 'alternate' vision of 1886, the Arc Gun shoots a beam of energy across a great distance and does significant damage to single enemies. Sort of like an electric sniper rifle.

Above: Three of the four-man Order group around which the story revolves sport facial hair of the sort that would make Hulk Hogan feel somewhat emasculated.





Above: What we've seen of the game's London so far has been rather bleak. However, this being a game that touches on the conflict between rich and poor, we do expect a few lavish backdrops.

The Order: 1886

CONCEPT A third-person shooter set in an alternate industrial-era London with a heavy bias towards cinematic presentation and cover-based combat.

Rise, Sir Galahad

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 4
Origin: USA
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Ready At Dawn
Release: 2014
Genre: Shooter
Players: 1 – TBC

Developer Profile

Founded in 2003, Californian-based Ready at Dawn was started by former Naughty Dog and Blizzard talent. Up until now it has been most readily associated with porting other studios' IP to the PSP.

Developer History

God Of War: Origins Collection **2011 [PS3]**
God Of War: Ghost of Sparta **2010 [PSP]**
Okami (Port) **2008 [Wii]**

High Point

Without question, *God of War: Ghost Of Sparta* offers some of the finest action available on the undervalued PSP. *Ghost Of Sparta* feels like a 'real' *God Of War* game, not a handheld knockoff.

Quite clearly, Sony sees *The Order: 1886* as a killer app – a game that will make you want to own a PS4 just to play this upcoming third-person shooter set in an alternate reality vision of industrial-era London. The problem with that is that here in 2014 third-person shooters are more common than *Assassin's Creed* and *Call Of Duty* combined. Getting your potential audience excited for another over-the-shoulder romp through waves of bad guys is no easy feat. Developer Ready At Dawn seems to be intimately aware of this problem, however, and, rather than promote the combat side of the game, is focusing attention on cinematic presentation and diversity of player interaction. Having seen *The Order: 1886* running live, we've now got a better idea of how it's setting out to accomplish that focus.

The Order is in Whitechapel to uncover new information about the upper-echelons of the Rebellion's hierarchy, the scene opening with Galahad and fellow Order member Lafayette surveying the landscape from a rooftop. This represents one of Ready At Dawn's promised 'interactive cutscene' moments that they're so eager to promote. During the cutscene, Galahad intermittently raises a pair of binoculars to his eyes in a bid to work out which parts of the large area his time is best spent searching. Whenever this happens the player is given control of the camera and can look around the scene as they wish – although you do eventually have to zero in on a specific location to progress. More impressive than the technique itself is the technology that has gone into powering it. Each of the graphically incredible cutscenes is running live from the game engine, meaning there's not a hint of delay between switching control of camera in and out of the player's hands. At the risk of hyperbole, this could well be the most visually impressive PS4 game yet to be revealed.

/// Scuttling down from the rooftops and working through a couple of terraced houses to get to street level, the demo's driver shoots a few walls and windows to highlight the quality of the environmental damage system, taking us to a combat situation against members of the Rebellion. Only during combat is there any kind of HUD, the screen kept completely free of clutter at all other times in an attempt to further exaggerate a filmic quality.

> "It's interesting to take immersive elements that people expect from movies and add those to our game"
> RU WEERASURYA, DIRECTOR READY AT DAWN

If we're being completely honest, gun-based combat looks to be incredibly similar in design to that of *Gears Of War* – albeit with nicer graphics. Given that this shooting sequence lasted all of about a minute, it's unfair to condemn *The Order: 1886* as a clone in combat terms (if 'condemn' is even the right word choice for having similarities to a series of Gears' quality), but what we've seen does look very familiar.

Low brick walls act as cover against enemy fire originating from the opposite end of a partially destroyed building, with enemies wielding various types of firearm blocking your route. This being an alternate-reality vision of 1886 London, Galahad packs a machine gun of steampunk design, each and every bullet drawing a discernible stream of jet-black smoke from barrel to body and crackling the air with a heavy thump. Enemies drop fairly easily, there's no bullet-cushioning of the *Gears*' kind – although that may change when you fight the tougher mutant race.

With only a single enemy remaining, a cutscene kicks in that sees Galahad jump down into a trench and engage his foe in melee combat. This is played-out via an elaborate QTE of standard against-the-clock button prompts punctuated with moments of having to pan the camera around the environment to pick up weapons. Supposedly these are 'branching' QTEs, meaning different failure rates and timing will lead to a different outcome at the end of the encounter.

Perhaps the most striking thing of all is the sheer scale of this project given the relatively small games Ready At Dawn has worked on up to this point. Quite probably, *The Order: 1886* could be the making (or breaking) of the entire studio.





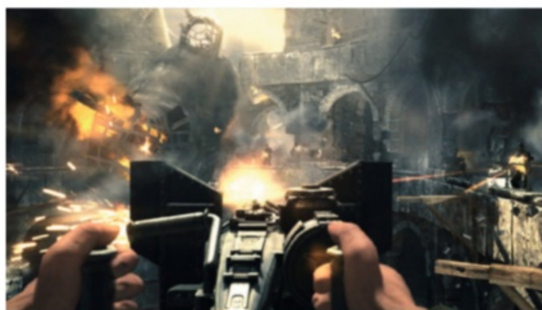
Above: The third-person view was chosen because of its filmic qualities of being able to see the protagonist at all times.

Above: Somewhere in that thing lurks the head of the Chancellor. Maybe. Probably not though.

Wolfenstein: The New Order

CONCEPT ■ Over the top single-player shooter that sees the first hero of the FPS return to thwart Nazi robot zombies.

For you, ze war is far from over





Above: Willhelm Strasse, better known as Deathshead, heads up the SS Special Projects Division and has been promoted from Obergruppenführer to lead the enemy attack in *The New Order*. He's the big bad guy, in other words.

The world needs another *Wolfenstein*, and not because of the heritage. It matters not a jot that the first game was among the very first stealth titles and it's 1992 treatment at the hands of id Software did even more to establish the first-person shooter. No, a new *Wolfenstein* is necessary because shooters seem to have vacated the middle ground between earnest realism and cartoon silliness where viscera and good honest balls-out fun collide. Last year's *Shadow Warrior* made a decent fist of it, and before it *Serious Sam* had its moments, but for far too long the single-player shooter has either taken itself far too seriously or just not bothered taking itself anywhere at all. Or zombies.

Initially set during the closing stages of a World War II in which Germany has put all it's research into cybernetics rather than developing lop-sided planes, *The New Order* brings out of retirement B.J. Blazkowicz, a gun toting all-terrain hero in the *Duke Nukem* mould who thankfully prefers to let his guns do all the grunting. Unfortunately on this occasion BJ falls short in his efforts to put a stop to the robo-enhanced Nazi hordes and ends up suffering amnesia just long enough for Hitler and his minions to enslave the free world. Fast forward a few years to the Sixties and BJ regains his marbles (aged 49) and is able once again to take up arms against the scourge of National Socialism.

/// Cue then a non-stop barrage of shooting down corridors and from balconies at anything wearing a stahlhelm, picking up and emptying guns and locating secret caches of ammo and armour. If all that sounds a bit oldschool that's because it's intended to be. Similar to the very excellent *Riddick* games that many within MachineGames worked on under Starbreeze, health will regenerate up to a point, but to get your health back up to full, good old fashioned health packs need to be consumed. Similarly, while there is a very neat cover mechanic and the whole game looks thoroughly modern (without fully being next-gen), *Wolfenstein: The New Order* feels very much closer to it's direct

> "Our team is driven to create an unforgettable action-adventure experience that will make FPS fans proud."
>
> JENS MATTHIES, CREATIVE DIRECTOR AT MACHINEGAMES



DOUBLE DAMAGE

Rather than offering secondary fire modes, most weapons in the game can be dual-wielded and we can happily report that running around with a shotgun in each hand is particularly satisfying, reminding us of a time when the hallmark of a good shooter was often to be found in the satisfying mess such once-necessary weapons left in their wake. In a nod to the Eighties action movies from which so many early shooters took their cue, picking up and walking around with mounted weapons is also a highlight.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: Sweden
Publisher: Bethesda
Developer: MachineGames
Release: 2014
Genre: FPS
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Established in 2009 by many of the founders of Starbreeze Studios, MachineGames was quickly snapped up by ZeniMax and is now an integral part of the Bethesda collective, alongside the still mighty, if somewhat diminished, id Software.

Developer History

Wolfenstein: The New Order **2014 (Multi)**

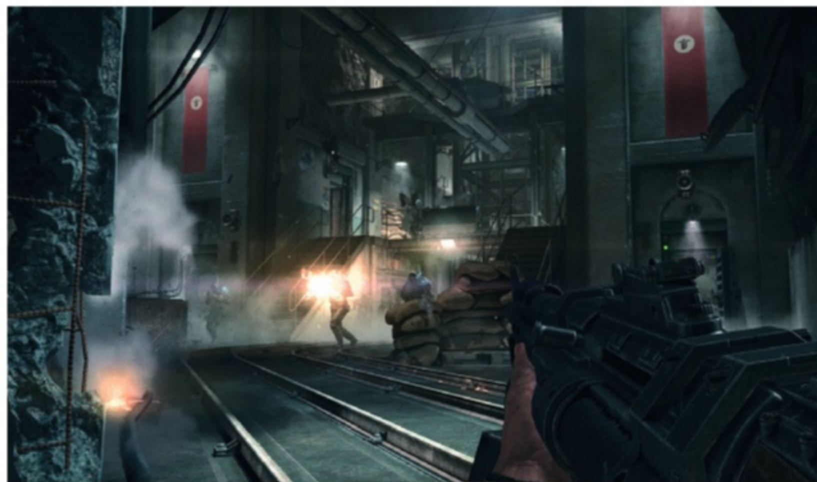
High Point

Having worked on a brace of excellent *Riddick* games with Starbreeze, MachineGames is no stranger to FPS development, and being in the same organisation as the originators of *Doom* and *Quake* means the studio gets to play with id's technology.

predecessors – and the seminal Wolfenstein 3D in particular. There's a standard issue weapon progression, from service pistol and potato masher grenades to rat-a-tat machine guns that could only have come from a Nazi armoury circa the age of Aquarius. There are a good few experimental weapons to play with later on too, as BJ creeps ever closer to shanking the kidneys of the techno-Nazi high command. Unfortunately, we 're told, while the iconic chain-gun wielding super soldiers will be in relative abundance, there's no Hitler showdown to look forward to, although we wouldn't be surprised at some point to find the Führer's preserved noggin in control of a gargantuan stormtrooper that needs bringing down to size.

It's worth pointing out that *Wolfenstein* does get very messy. The camera lingers over every slice and stab, ensuring we get to see arteries open and hear gobs of blood hit the floor. While the game isn't quite as unnecessarily graphic as, say, *Sniper Elite*, there are plenty of attempts to shock. One scene in which two characters are being tortured has you choosing which poor blighter will have their eyes gouged out, which you're then forced to witness. This being *Wolfenstein* and not *Call Of Duty*, you can excuse such over-eager acts as obvious Tarantino-inspired panto, but it stills seems a bit unpleasant when coming to the game cold.

Our own fuddy-duddiness aside, the new *Wolfenstein* seems to be straddling the gap between veneration and modern expectation well, as perfectly highlighted in the absurd German voice cues that were so beloved in id's breakthrough game. Hopefully once we get our hands on the full campaign we'll find much the same delicate balance throughout. In the continued absence of a new *Doom*, hope rather than expectation remains high.



Above: While there are some weapons from WWII, most have been adapted based on how Nazi technology might have evolved. Below: Corridors have come such a long way since 1992.



■ Below: We never thought that we would actually miss the WWII aesthetic in a game, but we're so sick of all this modern warfare nonsense that this is refreshing. The setting itself seems to be represented excellently, and the environments we've seen promise to open up fascinating new ground for a stealth shooter.



THE NEXT GENERATION OF SNIPER

SNIPER ELITE 3 is coming to Xbox One and PS4 as well as the Xbox 360 and PS4 – something that takes its toll on the development team behind the game. "Because of next-gen development, something like a tank is taking about 30% more time to make because of the higher fidelity textures and the improved tessellation. Obviously, we want to use the fidelity available to us as best we can, so that means everything is taking more time and planning." This is refreshing to hear – while it may mean longer turnaround periods for games generally, at least it's clear Rebellion is keen to make the most of the hardware available.





■ Right: Although you can ghost it through missions, the epitome of stealth and skill, the temptation to pop open a few skulls here and there is just too much.







Sniper Elite 3

CONCEPT ■ Carrying on in the same vein as the other *Sniper Elite* games, the third instalment travels to North Africa during World War II.

Be polite, be professional

The *Sniper Elite* games have become the default destination for gamers that want the kind of interactive violence that only videogames can offer. The series hits upon an odd mix of authentic realism and comic book uber-violence; the weapons, environments, aesthetic detail and story all take care to stay within the boundaries of real history, but the undeniably fun skull-popping madness that ensues when you begin to lay siege to an enemy encampment all gets a bit *Mortal Kombat* – the X-Ray vision the kill-cams switch to is pure grotesque voyeurism. "I think it's appealing because it is a standout feature," explains Chris Payton, head of art at Rebellion, "I can't think of another game that does anything else along those lines to the same extent."

We agree, and there is no doubt that the unashamedly over-the-top kill-cam is a huge draw for the series. "I think we were actually surprised by how much attention the kill-cam got with the release of *Sniper Elite V2*. I don't think there was that much press attention, it was really the YouTubers that went mad for it," elaborates Payton. The camera and its inherent bloody gratification all play into what *Sniper Elite* wants to do as a series, though – reflect the life and job of a sniper working their way through the battlefields of World War II.

Although cartoony, the cracked skulls and burst testicles of your victims all respond to your bullets so effectively that you'd think you killed these poor souls yourself, giving weight to the game and offering a palpable reward for your heroic Nazi-suppressing actions (especially if you've been crawling through the dusty scrub of a hostile African warzone all afternoon).

/// North Africa is certainly a rare setting for any narrative taking place during World War II, and Rebellion knows this: "I think North Africa was chosen partly because it's often overlooked and most WWII games are set in Northern France or Germany. The British were there, the Italians, the Germans, the Americans – it's a very interesting theatre of conflict that happened at an interesting time of the war."

Considering the other *Sniper Elite* games revolved around murdering your way through some Nazis to get to rendezvous points, meet objectives and generally progress, *Sniper Elite 3* seems to dial back the full-on necessity for carnage. "You don't have to kill people on a lot of levels, for example," Payton explains, "many of the objectives revolve around destroying targets rather than people, so you can kill soldiers to make it easier or you can avoid them or distract them to get the job done."

Unlike its predecessors that stayed glued to European ground, leading you through claustrophobic cities and corridors, we'd heard that *Sniper Elite 3* was going to be set in an open world, but Payton corrected us after we saw Rebellion play through a level or two: "'Open world' is perhaps too grand a statement, sandbox is probably more accurate," he explained, "there are a number of ways to play levels – you could jump in and have a big shootout (although that's incredibly difficult), or you can adapt a stealth approach to various different levels of discipline." This style of play falls in line with how most games seem to be made now – offering the player a choice of how they progress, rather than holding their hand and forcing them down levels that seem to suffer from inhibitive tunnel vision.

> "There has been a lot said in the press about games coming out on PS4 at 1080p and on Xbox One at 720p, but we're running this game on 1080p on both"
>
> CHRIS PAYTON, HEAD OF ART REBELLION

That design philosophy wouldn't have worked in *Sniper Elite 2*, though – the AI wasn't the sharpest (the Nazi forces had their fingers rested on a hair-trigger) and the way the enemy reacted made stealth practically impossible. "One of the major issues of feedback from *Sniper Elite V2*," Payton tells us, "was that the AI was a bit clunky, that you could make one tiny little noise and suddenly the entire German army was on you." So what has Rebellion done to remedy this? "The entire AI system has been readdressed and is more believable; now the levels have been greatly opened up, the AI are capable of a whole lot more."

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: United Kingdom
Publisher: 505 Games
Developer: Rebellion
Release: Q2 2014
Genre: Stealth Shooter
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Rebellion has been around for a while – building up from humble beginnings in 1993, developing games for the Amiga, the developer has shown a resilience to the chaotic and unpredictable nature of the games industry and is still going strong today, and can usually be found working its magic on licensed games.

Developer History

Sniper Elite V2 **Multi [2012]**
NeverDead **PS3, 360 [2012]**
Aliens Vs Predator **Multi [2010]**

High Point

Aliens Vs Predator had some genuinely fresh ideas. Allowing you to play as either a Colonial Marine, an Alien or Predator gave the title a longevity and variety that stood out even in the most recent 2010 edition.

WORLDS OF WARCRAFT

WHILE MANY HAD been predicting the demise of *World Of Warcraft* with worldwide subscriptions falling in 2013 and down to *just* 7.6m last November, between the announcement of the game's fifth expansion, *Warlords Of Draenor* (likely due at the end of the year), and the early success of *Hearthstone*, it's obvious that there's more than a little life left in the Warcraft brand. Indeed, *WOW* remains the most popular subscription MMO and many predict *Hearthstone* will grow to become the biggest iOS game when it's eventually released for tablets later in the year.

Above: Remarkably, considering Blizzard's size and resources, the team behind *Hearthstone* is a modest one, numbering fewer than 20 developers working across desktop and touchscreen versions of the game.





Above: *Hearthstone* should be available on iPad shortly after the desktop version. Android will follow a little later. After that, who knows? Console versions haven't been ruled out.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Mac and mobile
Origin: US
Publisher: Blizzard
Developer: In-house
Release: 2014
Genre: Card
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Starting out porting games like *Battle Chess II*, Blizzard quickly rose to prominence in 1994 with *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*, first popularising the RTS genre and then establishing co-operative online gaming with *Diablo* in 1996. Since then the Californian studio has dominated PC gaming with a string of highly successful sequels and spin-offs.

Developer History

Diablo III
2012 [PC, Mac, PS3, 360]

StarCraft
1998 [PC, Mac, N64]

Justice League Task Force
1995 [SNES]

High Point

While the persistent success of *World Of Warcraft* is an obvious Blizzard highlight, the importance of the *StarCraft* series in establishing eSports is equally as significant an achievement – just ask gamers in South Korea.

Hearthstone: Heroes Of Warcraft

CONCEPT ■ Free-to-play online card battler from the makers of *Warcraft*. Likely to be quite popular.

Blizzard's cards are on the table

There have been no shortage of digital and online card games released over the years, but it's fair to say there's been a veritable 52-card pickup of them since the twin revolutions of touchscreen technology and microtransactions have come into play. Indeed, it's felt a little like the early years of the MMORPG era, with some big and small names – Mojang and Wizards Of The Coast among them – coming to the table but not cleaning up as we might have expected.

Hearthstone sees the *World Of Warcraft* developer loudly enter the room and pull up a seat, an act that you would assume can only conclude in total Blizzard domination. Having made its own the genres of real-time strategy and massively-multiplayer role-playing, it's only reasonable to expect that Blizzard's intimidating presence will cause other players to wither and fold.

Given its Nintendo-like ability to take a proven formula and popularise it to perfection, Blizzard's entry into the digital card game pack is as you might expect. Most obvious is that it taps into the popular *Warcraft* brand, with heroes, spells and minions lifted and adapted from lore, ensuring that millions of players will feel right at home with the setting even if they may initially feel a little lost in the mechanics of the game. They needn't, of course. Blizzard has been careful to ensure *Hearthstone* feels tactile and physical, with cards flowing in and out of sight rather than always appearing as if conjured into existence. There are plenty of flourishes, of course, but it's easy to follow what is going on, partly also because the game is remarkably easy to get the hang of.

/// Each game plays out thus: Each player has a hero with the objective to beat the other down to zero health. You do this by bringing minions into your line and playing spells, some of which are exclusive to the hero at the heart of your defence. There is a cost to playing each card, in mana points, starting with just one in the first round which increases and refreshes each turn so that it isn't long before cards are flying about and tactics come into play. Compared to Mojang's deeper but sometimes laborious *Scrolls*, games of *Hearthstone* are remarkably quick.

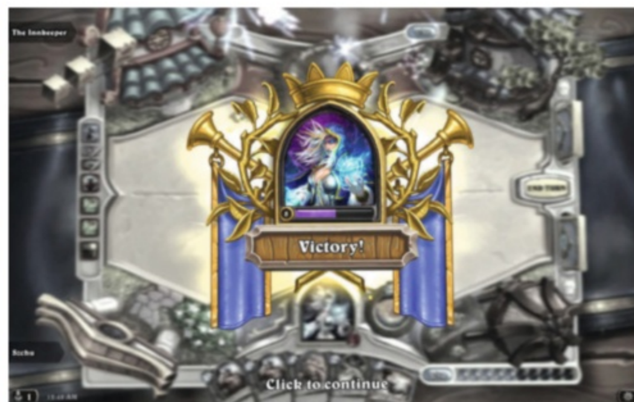
> "We're putting a lot of focus into creating a fun game that is easy to play but also has a lot of depth"
> MIKE MORHAIME CEO, BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Starting with the Mage (which is Jaina Proudmoore, in case you were wondering), it's by taking on the other heroes, either AI or player-controlled, that you can gain access to all nine hero decks and can then level them up to earn new and rarer cards. Obviously Blizzard would like you to hand over a few groats and buy the odd card pack rather than use in-game gold, but thankfully it isn't something that seems necessary. Nor are you currently bombarded with ads trying to get you to part with your hard-earned coin. We imagine that once the game gets under your skin and the compulsion to collect the game's rarest cards sets in, temptation might be something to contend with. By then you may have invested enough hours that throwing down $10 for seven packs of 'expert' cards is perfectly acceptable.

Whether you invest just your time or supplement it with cash, it's likely that most players will tire of the standard Duel and Play modes, which offer unranked games between friends or skill-matched battles with strangers that can be casual or set to contribute to your ranking. Currently the only tournament option is Arena mode, a pay-to-enter (either with gold or dollars) king of the hill-style competition with randomised decks where three defeats means you're out of the game. While there is a spectator mode in development, which is likely to tie in with a more formal competition structure, the game does currently feel a bit light on game variety.

Given the popularity of *Hearthstone* already (a million people have played the closed beta), it seems inconceivable that Blizzard has missed a trick. Then again, when has the *Warcraft* creator not held just a few cards close to its chest?





■ Above: Two years in the making, the careful and considered approach comes across in *Hearthstone: Heroes Of Warcraft*'s design.

■ Below: Part of a level needs you to grab a phone and hold it to your ear – it's the details like this that make us believe Untold Games are keen to do everything they can to make this a great Virtual Reality experience. Right: It seems André has a lot of time on his hands (sorry).





Loading Human

CONCEPT ■ André, an Alzheimer's patient, is booted into a program called Loading Human in the hope of preserving his memories and cure his condition – but everything is not as it seems…

Thanks for the memories

Virtual Reality has a lot of potential – it's been heralded as the future of gaming for decades now, and the idea of immersing yourself in a completely cyber world has been the staple fantasy of science fiction for even longer. But now we're actually creating the technology to make these fantasies a reality – and by putting you directly in the first-person perspective of a character, devices such as the Oculus Rift have unlimited potential to tell intimate, personal stories.

That's very much the central goal for Untold Games' *Loading Human* – which was pitched by writer and game director Flavio Parenti as "*Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind* meets *Monkey Island*". As a description, that sounds vague and a bit too high-concept, but after getting some hands-on time with the game, we have to admit we couldn't really think of a better description ourselves.

By equipping a headset, the Oculus Rift itself and a Razer Hydra, players are put in the shoes of André Gibson, a troubled but brilliant writer afflicted with Alzheimer's. André's wife, Michelle – a scientist and Nobel Prize winner – has invented a method of saving him: completely stripping away his conscious mind and popping it into a robot. This materialises in gameplay by André having to relive his memories as they're being scanned, re-enacting them in real-time. Michelle – the self-sacrificing type – transfers herself into the same robot as André and uses her memories to fill in André's missing ones. It's all got the potential to go a bit Frankenstein.

The premise itself is fresh and interesting, and manages to utilise the unique properties of the Oculus Rift to deliver a gameplay experience that really makes you empathise with André as a character. The game is effectively a point-and-click, reskinned and reimagined for a fully immersive 3D experience. The first 20 minutes of the game act as a tutorial – Michelle has set up a puzzle in the house and you're tasked with finding items to unlock her laboratory. You're orientated in the Rift, and then taught how to use the Hydra controllers effectively. It's a strange experience – every interactive object can be held and observed from every angle in your hands. One puzzle had us remove a clock from the wall, turn it around and take a key off the back.

/// "We've actually found that non-gamers are quicker learners than gamers in *Loading Human*," Elisa Di Lorenzo, Untold Games' financial manager tells us. "Typically, gamers go up to an item and expect an animation after they interact with it. In *Loading Human*, you have to interact with objects yourself. We don't want players to think this is your usual point and click game – we want them to explore André's life and memories by actually *pointing* and *clicking*." This design philosophy manifests itself in-game by making players interact with certain objects in certain ways – there's no inventory, for example, so if you need to move an item elsewhere then you have to carry it there (holding down the Hydra's trigger lets you hold things). This gives a tactile, physical presence to the game that makes you, as a player, far more emotionally engaged with what you're doing – at one point we had to drag our dead wife's body to a lock that would only open with her fingerprints, something we've seen before in games, but never actually had to *do*.

"If we're going to have a more intimate relationship with games," says Lorenzo, "then we need to immerse players in different ways. We've spent a lot of time on our environments, because we want the player to believe they're where André is – our main focus is keeping the player in the world."

> "Interaction is the most important word we think of while speaking of Loading Human's gameplay experience"
> LOADING HUMAN'S PRESS RELEASE

There are bugs and glitches present in the early build of the game we played, but that's to be expected – it's still early days for *Loading Human* yet. But there is passion and originality in the project, along with a potentially unique story and clear vision – a combination that bodes well for Untold Games. The Oculus Rift would benefit from a system seller, and this high-concept, high-brow adventure may well be the headset's first highlight.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC/Mac
Origin: Italy
Publisher: Untold Games
Developer: In-house
Release: Q4 2014
Genre: Point-and-click
Players: 1

Developer Profile

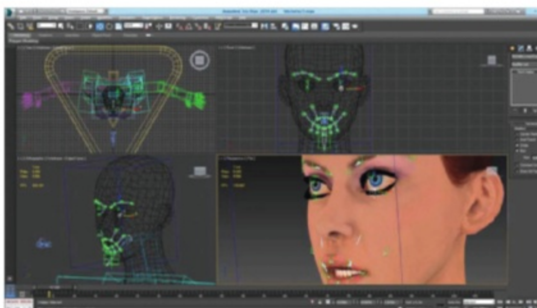
Untold Games formed when Italian actor, director and writer Flavio Parenti met with a small group of Italian developers (who worked mostly in mobile games) and pitched *Loading Human*. Sharing a common vision, Parenti and the developers aim to work with the Oculus Rift to deliver a true VR experience.

High Point

While not strictly Untold Games' work, Flavio Parenti has directed a film called *Sogno Farfalle Quantiche* that experimented with various innovative narrative forms – which should have proved good practice before working on a Virtual Reality game.



■ Below: *Loading Human* has a wide range of items to pick up, move around, examine, open, close, touch, throw, bend, read and so on. We spent a lot of time trashing Michelle's laboratory. Why? Because it's fun to break things, especially when you're doing it with your real hands.

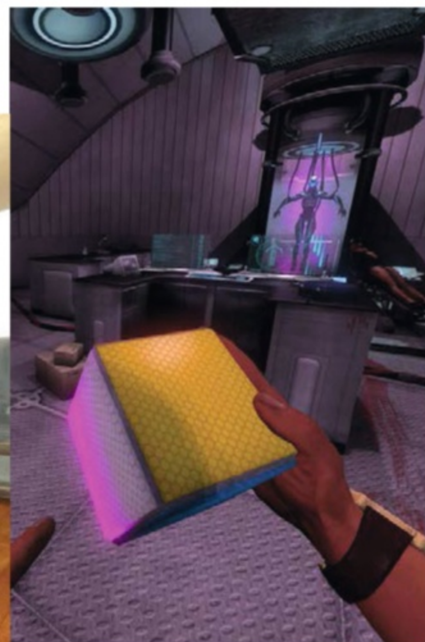


CUBIC FLAIR

ONE OF THE trickiest puzzles we encountered in our hands-on was a sort-of 'Simon Says' memory cube. Michelle had left it for André to find, defrost (we had to melt the ice on the cube with a frying pan – the level and puzzle design is consistently tricky) and then 'solve' before we could progress. Each face of the object flashed in an order you had to replicate by touching. This task showed off the level of precision available in the game; the Hydra will track the movement of your hands at every angle and extension from the body – it feels like you actually have a pair of virtual hands ready to do your bidding. It's exciting and new – and we can't wait to try it again.

■ Below: The odd, curved perspective in the shots is a result of the flattening out of scenes that on the Oculus Rift headset look entirely natural.





■ Above: The section of the game we played hints at a macabre, intense story – perhaps reminiscent of something written by James Smythe or Kazuo Ishiguro.

■ Below: The level of facial animation that can be achieved with the CryEngine is truly stunning, so we hope *Kingdom Come* can make more of an impact with this tech than the sadly forgettable *Ryse* did.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Xbox One, PS4
Origin: Czech Republic
Publisher: Warhorse
Developer: In-house
Release: Q4 2015
Genre: RPG
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Warhorse is a Czech studio that came into being when the talent behind games such as *Mafia*, *Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising* and *ArmA* got together, with support from the CG/FX artist of *Perfume: Story Of A Murderer*. There's a strong pedigree in the studio, and we have high hopes that *Kingdom Come* will be the start of something great.

Kingdom Come: Deliverance

CONCEPT ■ Developer Warhorse thinks there are too many fantasy games with elves, wizards, dragons and magic out there. It wants you to think of *Kingdom Come* as *Braveheart: The Game*. We can live with that.

And lead us not into temptation

The 15th century. As far as we're aware, that wasn't a particularly pleasant time to be alive – yes, London was growing, the printing press had been invented and, most exciting of all, wool had became a valuable export, but Europe as a whole was stagnating socially, culturally and morally. Royal hierarchies needed orders of knights to police their realms, every politician and noble had to watch their back at all times for fear of someone plunging a knife into it… England in the 1400s was a time of political intrigue, vast expansion and countless perils, both at home and overseas.

> "Experience epic battles between armored knights, interrogate, bribe, threaten, love, help, fight… It's up to you to decide what to do"
> WARHORSE KICKSTARTER STATEMENT



■ Above: Combat works similarly to *Dark Souls* – but is much easier – and Warhorse promises to expand the scale of the encounters to full-scale battlefields.

A great period to set a fully realistic, immersive RPG in, then. This is no *Kingdoms Of Alamur: Reckoning* or *Skyrim*. This is more simulation than RPG. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, built in the CryEngine like the recent historically based *Ryse: Son of Rome*, puts you in the shoes of a young blacksmith who – surprise, surprise – sets out on a quest of vengeance after a raiding party burns his hometown to the ground. On your journeys, you will visit various villages and towns, each with their own way of life that reacts realistically to your actions.

Where *Skyrim*'s populace ran like automata, the NPCs of *Kingdom Come* actually have some intelligence powering their AI – if you interrupt the routine of a farmer (by mercilessly killing all his cows, for example), they won't just go outside and mourn his dead stock all day; they'll actively find something else to do. Kill a bartender, their patrons spend their evenings elsewhere. This only sounds like a minor aspect of the game, but pairing it up with an RPG world where all the magic and mystical elements are stripped away makes sense – in a world where there are no dragons to create drama, where there is no magic to empower you, the intrigue comes from adapting to everyday life.

Warhorse's Kickstarter-backed epic covers all the bases necessary to be a legitimate medieval sim; food will turn in your bag if you don't eat it quickly enough, you'll start to underperform if you don't sleep, you must use your horse as an inventory-booster otherwise you'll be able to carry only what you can cram in a bag. After all, when you're wearing about four layers of plate armour and chain mail and wielding a sword you blunted after a lazy bit of smithing (yes, that can happen), you're not going to have much strength left to carry all your rations.

If you're a fan of the no-frills fantasy experiences of *Mount & Blade*, the tangible olde kingdom worlds of *The Witcher* franchise and the responsive first-person combat of *Skyrim*, then *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* may be the next-gen experience for you. We're confident that *Kingdom Come* will make better use of the CryEngine's phenomenal facial animation technology than *Ryse* did, at least.



JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: All Star Battle

CONCEPT The popular anime and manga series makes its way back to the videogame realm after a lengthy absence...

Camper than a row of tents

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS3
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: CyberConnect2
Release: Spring 2014
Genre: Fighter
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

CyberConnect2 is probably most notable for their work on the *Naruto* licence, but its developmental skills also brought us the anger-inducing *Asura's Wrath* and the expansive *.hack* series. The developer also has limited experience in the mobile realm, and a few titles released on the Vita and PSP.

Developer History

Asura's Wrath / PS3/ Xbox 360 **[2012]**

Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Storm / PS3 **[2008]**

.hack//G.U / PS2 **[2006]**

High Point

Asura's Wrath was praised for its over the top spectacle, the sharp presentation of its visuals, and its narrative content – something found lacking in a lot of other hack 'n' slashes.

It's no secret that we're big fans of fighting games here at games™, and we're always excited when something a little bit different pops up on our radar. We've had our eye on *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: All Star Battle* for a while, and when Namco Bandai disclosed that the game would see a limited physical release in the West, we rallied our allies in the office and set about wailing on each other in a hands-on battle royale. The most notable thing about this game is its colourful campness – the whole title is bursting at the seams with over-the-top stylish madness, something that's been translated incredibly well from the influential manga and anime the game is based on. Beautiful presentation, unusual combat mechanics, 40+ characters and some special moves that make us feel like they need their very own epilepsy warning all combine to produce a fighter that's refreshing and different. Imagine *Street Fighter III: Third Strike* in a 3D plane with more insane characters and dangerous environments, and you've got a good idea of what *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* can offer you.

1 IT'S UPDATED FROM THE JAPANESE VERSION

The Japanese release of *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* attracted a little controversy with its reliance on microtransactions – the system revolves around batteries; tokens that are needed to enter fights, which recharge over time. Use too many (in Arcade mode or Story mode) and you'll have to pay if you want to recharge them quicker – a peculiar business model for a full-price boxed title. Thankfully, the Western release is seeing these recharge times reduced by about 75%.





"Stylish fights, colorful effects, original Stands and a high skill-cap fighting game: this is what awaits JoJo's Bizarre Adventure fans!"
PRESS RELEASE, NAMCO BANDAI









2 ITS INFLUENCES ARE EVERYWHERE

We won't see some of the game's influences coming to the fore properly in the West because of licensing, but *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* features characters based on and named after Nineties rock outfits – Aerosmith, Red Hot Chili Peppers, King Crimson, Sex Pistols are but a few. The series' creator, Hirohiko Araki, is a fashion designer, and characters from *JoJo's* also influenced the design of Guile and Rose from *Street Fighter* and Benimaru from *King Of Fighters*.

3 IT LETS YOU FIGHT ON HORSEBACK

You read that right. The game lets you fight from the back of a horse. Each character has a variety of styles; Hamon is your standard stance, handy for quick, light attacks and regular specials, Stand summons each character's spectral ally (think personas in *Persona 4 Arena*) which are more technical and aggressive, and then there's the mounts. Despite having a shallow movepool, the mounted stance is helpful for negating low attacks, closing distance on the opponent and setting up crazy ultra moves.

4 IT'S GOT A REWARDINGLY DEEP COMBAT SYSTEM

Like *Third Strike*, the parry system is the secret to success. Instead of allowing you a quick block, though, successful parries in *JoJo's* see your character dash into the foreground or background (this is a 2D-like fighter that operates in 3D planes). Block at the right time and you'll sort-of sidestep the attack a few frames before your opponent's animation finishes, setting you up perfectly for a crazy manual combo, or an automatic one that can be instigated by holding down forward and light attack.

5 IT'S GOT A RIDICULOUS STORY

The original manga is split into eight parts, and the structure of the anime followed this pattern, too. It'd be remiss of the developer to ignore that trend, so the game's campaign sees you play through each season in order, complete with all the fan service you'd expect. Playing through the narrative earns you points with which to buy characters you defeat or extra skins for your unlocked characters. Each encounter with an enemy pits you against a different fighting style of theirs, too, keeping the battles fresh and unpredictable.

Right: Both the *Layton* and *Wright* titles are as much about the story as they are puzzles, and offering two sides of the story makes the narrative more compelling.





Professor Layton Vs Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney

CONCEPT Two of the most popular handheld franchises out of Japan combine in one big murderous puzzle extravaganza.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Level-5, Capcom
Release: 28 March
Genre: Puzzle
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Focussing on Level-5, the Japanese studio has carved itself a sterling reputation with a series of imaginative franchises on multiple formats. Well known for the *Professor Layton* series, elsewhere it has found success with *Inazuma Eleven, White Knight Chronicles* and *Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch.*

Developer History

Professor Layton And The Azran Legacy **2013 [3DS]**
Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch **2013 [PlayStation 3]**
Guild01 **2012 [3DS]**
White Knight Chronicles **2010 [PlayStation 3]**

High Point

Ni No Kuni wasn't just an immersive JRPG, but a gorgeously conceived and inviting fantasy world that took Studio Ghibli's patented animation and brought it to life.

Finger pointing

Franchise crossovers usually represent the dearth of creative integrity. You might fondly remember several of your favourite cartoons from childhood crossing paths in some seminal television event, but the truth is that the concept is a desperate clutch at driving up viewing figures.

That's why it's so unusual that videogames – outside of sports, fighting and party titles – have mostly ignored the lucrative potential of a crossover. No Link raiding the Mushroom Kingdom alongside Mario, no Nathan unearthing some Mayan temple with Lara and we've yet to see Master Chief embark on a bug hunt with Marcus Fenix. But what we are about to get is London's finest steam pipe hat wearing private investigator Professor Layton and Capcom's flapping lawyer Phoenix Wright joining together for an adventure that transports the pair into a fantasy realm.

It all centres around a young girl named Espella Cantabella, who crosses paths with both Layton and Wright before the two are transported to her homeland of Labyrinthia. And while the title of the game suggests that Layton and Wright will be opposing one another in the courtroom, the majority of the game has the two working together to solve the mystery at the heart of the story.

The prologue of the game establishes the format of how this will take place. The story is divided in half, players essentially playing separate *Phoenix Wright* and *Professor Layton* titles that just so happen to feature the same characters and setting. You'll begin wandering around town as Layton, solving puzzles both related to the case and random brainteasers that strangers seem so enthused to quiz him with, and these pockets of gameplay are sectioned off almost into episodic pieces. The story then picks up with Wright, the gameplay switching to the courtroom investigations synonymous with Capcom's series, before returning once again to Layton. It's an effective if slightly unremarkable way to blend the two series, but once the introductory portion of the game is over, it settles into a better pace.

> "The story is divided, players essentially playing separate Wright and Layton titles"

But despite the fractured nature of its gameplay, everything about *Layton Vs Wright* feels like an event. From the gloriously bombastic cut-scenes right up until the confrontation between the two videogame icons, everything is pitched perfectly. It might be a sure-fire way to drive up sales figures, but when its done as well as this we can't find much reason to object.



Above: The very different animation styles gel quite well together throughout, in particular during the impressive fully animated cut-scenes.

■ Below: Much like *Don't Starve* before it, *Invisible, Inc* doesn't teach you anything about its core set of systems. It's up to the player to figure those out and exploit them in every way they can, such as knowing which way a guard may face on their next turn.



IN AND OUT

YOU'LL HAVE 20 turns before a hit squad will appear, and at this point – as you might imagine – getting out becomes increasingly difficult. As such, each stage becomes a balancing act as you weigh up the risk – and time it should take – to grab the cash from a distant safe between the safety of exiting the level without that extra bonus. Adding to matters, some stages will come with particular objectives – such as picking up a USB stick from a certain guard – before you can escape. Each time it's about considering your chance of success and executing that as flawlessly as you can. There's a lot more to *Invisible, Inc*'s mechanics than screenshots might suggest.





■ Above: Accessing the mainframe is key to surviving through each floor, so the ability to hack terminals through walls will be a huge asset. Keep on those agents, if you can.

Invisible, Inc

CONCEPT ■ A turn-based RPG that – for a change – favours staying out of combat and hiding in the shadows. Maintains the hallmarks of the genre, but with a very unique twist.

Don't hide, we want to see you

We're through the looking glass, people. The lines between reviews and previews are blurring, and it's all thanks to *Minecraft* and its trend-setting alphafunding approach to development. *Invisible, Inc* – the latest to take to early access – is an isometric turn-based RPG stealth game. And a roguelike. That's a lot of descriptors there, of course, but what you should really take from that is that Klei has, seemingly, stumbled upon an untapped market. Sure, games such as *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* or *Skyrim* have elements that could pin them as 'stealth RPGs', but neither really *focus* on it. For that reason *Invisible, Inc* is something special, and it's not even out of alpha development yet.

Here you'll play the part of an espionage organisation looking to infiltrate huge corporations around the world, steal their valuables and – if you're lucky – get out alive. You'll progress through each procedurally-generated floor, tiptoe behind patrolling guards, locate and break into safes and then look to make a deft escape. Sometimes the odds will be in your favour, and sometimes fate can be cruel. Yet in spite of its turn-based nature, *Invisible, Inc* is thrilling; each choice is punctuated by that dreaded fear it may not have been the smartest move.

Different spy classes offer different bonuses – whether it's detecting machines through walls, running silently or simply the ability to use sniper rifles – meaning the options you have available to you will adapt depending on the rules set before you. Your vision is initially limited, and so it's up to your squad of agents to fan out, get a lay of the land, figure out patrol patterns and – preferably – grab as much loot as you can. All within 20 turns, because after that the alarms are raised and a vicious group of four soldiers storm in to hunt you down. Luckily you have a few advantages up your sleeve, and if you manage to hack a computer terminal to earn yourself 'CPUs' you can enter the mainframe to take command of camera feeds, unlock safes, unblock restricted areas or even commandeer otherwise deadly automated turrets. Certain corporations implement safeguards, however, that can activate random – and always bothersome – time-limited penalties.

/// What you've hopefully gathered by now is that *Invisible, Inc* is a game built on its core mechanics, which all good RPGs should be. Every single turn offers you a multitude of options, and though you're rarely in control of more than four agents at a time (you'll begin with just two) each turn can last a surprising amount of time as you not only plan your current moves for their maximum efficiency but also your potential later steps and even those of your ever-aware guards. There's a level of depth here that few modern RPGs seem to handle, but it's in understanding the strategy of its mechanics that makes *Invisible, Inc* already a standout title – and it's still in development.

There are bugs here and there – some that will force you to restart all over again – but already *Invisible, Inc* is worth the $20 it costs to gain access to. Difficulty curves in the random level generation need tweaking and the benefits of stealth play are currently not as compelling as they undoubtedly will be, but this still offers as many hours of gameplay as you might expect from any strategy RPG. If nothing else it is doing something completely new in a genre that – as compelling as it often is – hasn't *really* evolved much beyond combat-heavy counterparts in the likes of *Shining Force*, *XCOM* or *Tactics Ogre*.

> "The biggest challenge to making a tactics stealth game is providing interesting options beyond combat"
>
> JAMES LANTZ KLEI ENTERTAINMENT

There are still questions surrounding *Invisible, Inc* but the potential for greatness is already here. Where Klei takes its turn-based stealth RPG next is as-yet unknown, but the developer has proven itself when alphafunding *Don't Starve* – and now the core tools are set in stone you'll likely only see improvements from here on out. It's hard to express just how original *Invisible, Inc* is, but then a large part of that is the expectation that comes from turn-based isometric strategy RPGs these days. Be sure to keep an eye on this one, this is the birth of something truly unique.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: US
Publisher: Klei Entertainment
Developer: In-house
Release: TBA
Genre: Strategy RPG
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Indie studio Klei Entertainment's heritage is a short one, but dense with a large number of recognisable – and highly rated – digital games. Cutting its teeth on Xbox Live game *Eets* and *Shank*, Klei really hit its stride with critically acclaimed *Mark Of The Ninja* and *Don't Starve* – proving the developer won't be tied down to any particular genre.

Developer History

Eets
2006 [Xbox Live]
Shank
2010 [Xbox Live]
Mark Of The Ninja
2012 [PC]
Don't Starve
2013 [PC]

High Point

Though many will claim *Mark Of The Ninja* to be Klei's peak, the constantly evolving *Don't Starve* has built and maintained a fanbase so strong the company later launched a Kickstarter purely for *Don't Starve* themed plushies, which actually succeeded.

The Elder Scrolls Online

CONCEPT ■ It's back to Tamriel's Second Era as Bethesda opens the online doors for all-comers to craft, quest and kill their way to the Imperial City

Tamriel With Friends. Or not – it's your choice

It's like being the last person alive on earth, except here in a quiet press-only beta for Bethesda's long-in-the-making MMO we're closer in essence to being the first. Quite apart from the relative solitude, it feels odd to be in this pre-series Tamriel at all – one in which the paths and walkways have been made wide to accommodate a stampede of questers rather than the few. Even the NPCs seem a little bewildered, as if they've just been bused in and haven't quite learnt their lines or memorised their cues. It doesn't feel *wrong* exactly, there is in fact a familiarity in the landscape and an innate desire to head out and explore it. In Bleakwater Isle especially – the starter zone close to Skyrim – the Norse huts and snowy peaks are suitably welcoming in their customary bleakness, but it does feel a little disconcerting to know that in a few weeks we'll be among a mass of busy heroes scurrying about rather than being *the one*.

As you might imagine there's still a great deal of nervousness from series diehards around the concept of there being an online *Elder Scrolls* in the first place. There are those who insist *The Elder Scrolls*' template for heroic role-play just doesn't work as a persistent online game, as if having 2000 heroes twerking about in elite armour is something that should remain the preserve of less worthy fantasy realms. Then there are those for whom the very possibility of joining friends, even if only to poke fun at raggedy newcomers, is at the very core of social gaming. After all, they argue, who hasn't played *Skyrim* and not wished they could tackle the game co-operatively?

/// Unfortunately the existence of *TESO* is unlikely to win the argument for either side. Those who come for story and try to burn through the quests alone will likely view the appearance of other players as an annoyance at best, at worst an immersion-shattering intrusion. That said ZeniMax appears to have gone to great lengths to keep soloers happy. Fairly strict naming rules should forbid the intrusion of variants of Lego1as, Fr0d0 and the like, while most climactic encounters will almost always be conducted in separate instances, which should do away with the hateful practice of spawn killing. As for the missions themselves, after a few hours exploring two of the three starting areas, we've yet to come across any requirement for the quota killing of harmless wildlife, which makes a refreshing change for a genre that seems to delight in formal animal slaughter.

Where the game is certain to surprise MMO doomsayers is in the combat system, which borrows heavily from *Oblivion* and *Skyrim* in terms of real-time weapon swinging, with the added dimension of hotbar skills that lay on extra tactics to an already well established block-and-parry system. Whether you view *The Elder Scrolls Online*'s combat as an evolution or a concession may well be moot, for in the limited skirmishing we've enjoyed so far combat has felt fluid and dynamic. A little less *oomph* in terms of contact, but just as much cut-and-thrust as in *Skyrim* and every bit as satisfying to conclude. Truth be told we almost forgot we were playing online, which suggests just how compelling and established *The Elder Scrolls*' fighty bits have become. As much as we're confident that ZeniMax has gone down the correct gameplay route in adapting *The Elder Scrolls* for the needs and expectations of a persistent world audience, it's hard not to remain sceptical as to the game's long-term success after seeing the last big budget MMO release, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, fall so rapidly so quickly after it launched. Despite BioWare lavishing its online debut with the most expensive missions any MMO had ever seen, players quickly exhausted *Old Republic*'s storyline and with only arena PVP to fall back on, there seemed no reason for players to subscribe. Hopefully ZeniMax has learnt from the mistakes of the past lest its first MMO entry suffer a similar fate. The masses are undoubtedly coming, but the trick is to get them to stick around.

> "We're thrilled that gamers are looking forward to The Elder Scrolls Online and we've been working hard to deliver the game that fans want"
>
> MATT FIROR ZENIMAX ONLINE STUDIOS

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Mac, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: US
Publisher: Bethesda
Developer: ZeniMax Online Studios
Release: 6 April
Genre: MMO RPG
Players: MMO

Developer Profile

Confusingly named after Bethesda's parent company, ZeniMax Online Studios was assembled purely to create an *The Elder Scrolls* MMO separate from Bethesda itself, so as not to get in the way of the single-player series. Whether there is a similar plan for *Fallout* has been a matter of fierce speculation for years.

Developer History

The Elder Scrolls Online 2014 [PC, Mac, Xbox One, PS4]

High Point

While ZeniMax Online Studios is yet to enjoy the release of its first game, studio head Matt Firor is something of a legend in online gaming circles, having been the producer on *Dark Age Of Camelot*, Mythic EA's MMO that predates and has outlasted *Warhammer Online: Age Of Reckoning*.









■ Above: Typical! You break out of your cell, find that you're stuck in limbo and in order to get your life back you have to fight a serpent of the underworld.



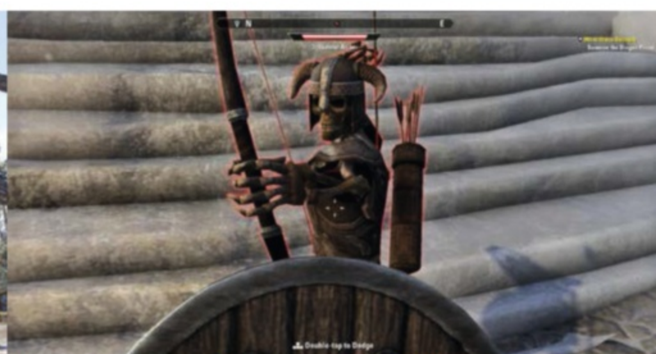
HOW TAMRIEL WENT TO WAR

THE ELDER SCROLLS Online starts familiarly enough, with you imprisoned in a dungeon suffering from temporary amnesia. Similarly to *Oblivion*'s first encounter, an old man immediately appears to hasten your release – looking not unlike Uriel Septim, as it happens. Known as The Prophet, his ethereal form reveals you to be a temporary resident of Coldharbour, a kind of Butlins for lost souls run by one Molag Bal. The game's prime antagonist, Bal is set on merging Tamriel with his abeyant realm, a nefarious plan of parallel world domination that requires the mass production of fresh souls. Thus it is that a persistent war between Tamriel's three opposing power blocs is masterminded.

Above: There are nine races and three warring factions in *The Elder Scrolls Online*. The Aldmeri Dominion combines High Elves, Wood Elves and Khajit. Orcs, Bretons and Redguards make up the Daggerfall Covenant, while Argonians, Dark Elves and Nords have come together to form the Ebonheart Pact. Left: While the graphics aren't quite up to the standard of *Skyrim* HD, the game seems to run surprisingly well on a modest PC.









SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

PERSONA Q

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Atlus**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **2014**



PERSONA Q will be the first time we'll seen the *MegaTen* spin-off franchise appear on something other than a PlayStation console. In what we assume is SEGA's handiwork (it recently acquired Atlus from Index Corporation), the game features chibi versions of *Persona 3* and *4* characters – an art style suited to the 3DS and its audience. *Persona Q* is an endless dungeon exploration game built around turn-based RPG combat.

CHILD OF LIGHT

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Ubisoft**
Developer: **Ubisoft Montreal**
ETA: **2014**



POWERED BY the gorgeous UbiArt Framework, *Child Of Light* is a platforming role-playing game that sees players take on the role of Aurora – a child from Austria, circa 1895, who is tasked with reclaiming the moon, the sun and the stars after falling into a coma. *Child Of Light* will feature a playable firefly that, we imagine, will handle like *Rayman Legends*' Murfy – we just hope it won't be as annoying.

DEKAMORI SENRAN KAGURA

Format: **PS Vita/PSP**
Publisher: **Tamsoft**
Developer: **Marvelous Entertainment**
ETA: **Q4 2014**



THE SENRAN *Kagura* series is notorious for its questionable focus on the female anatomy, and in a move that nobody could have predicted, the series is releasing a 'rhythm-action cooking game' for the Vita/PSP. The *Dekamori* part of the title translates roughly into 'huge portions', which may be a double-entendre, but who knows? It seems that if you cook a perfect meal in the game, the female characters' clothes fall off, because, y'know, reasons.

AR NOSURGE

Format: **PS3**
Publisher: **The Astronauts**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **2014**



THE PS3 RPG features anime-inspired cut-scenes and action-RPG battles. It looks like standard RPG fare, but an interesting twist comes in the 'purification ceremonies' (which happen in swimsuits) that represent vital 'skinship' between the male protagonist and his female companions… we have literally no idea what this means, but we *know* it'll get brought up an ERSB meeting if the game ever gets localised.

BIGFEST

Format: **PS Vita**
Publisher: **Sony Computer Entertainment**
Developer: **On The Metal**
ETA: **2014**



BIGFEST IS a game that revolves around building a festival that consists of real-world unsigned bands and promoting yourself to death in the hopes of attracting better venues, bigger sponsors and more crowds. It looks like you'll basically be able to pretend you're Michael Eavis, but instead of a massive farm in Somerset, all you'll need is a PS Vita and an internet connection.

MARIO KART 8

Format: **Wii U**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **May 30 2014**



AFTER ALL the sermonising over hardware sales and half-baked predictions concerning Nintendo's imminent corporate collapse, it's good to get back to talking about a big Nintendo game for a change: *Mario Kart 8* finally has a release date, which means there are just a couple of months to go until we get to see how Bowser's minions handle themselves on the road for the very first time.

MIGHTY NO 9

Format: **PC, PS4**
Publisher: **Comcept**
Developer: **Inti Games, Comcept**
ETA: **Q2 2015**



THIS IS basically a *Mega Man* game without *Mega Man* in it (Inafune left that trademark behind when he moved on from Capcom). You play as Beck – one of nine in a series of robots, and the only one not the victim of a computer virus. Each Mighty Number you take down grants you the ability to shapeshift into some new form, making each level more dynamic and giving you more puzzles to solve.

THE BINDING OF ISAAC: REBIRTH

Format: **PS Vita, PS4, PC**
Publisher: **Steam, Sony Computer Entertainment**
Developer: **Nicalis**
ETA: **2014**



FROM THE unique mind of Edmund McMillen, Rebirth is a 'demake' of the original game due for release on Vita and PS4 later this year. 16-bit graphics will replace the Flash-based animations of the first release, and Nicalis will take the helm with this version (because, we assume, McMillen's busy with *Mew-Genics*). Rebirth will come with offline co-op and updated gameplay that was cut from the original, too!



CANCELLED – Factory 4 (PAL) (PS3)

Marvelous AQL Europe has cancelled the European release of *Rune Factory 4* – there has been no outlined reason for the cancellation, but we assume it's due to the closure of Neverland Co, the game's developer.



DELAYED – The Division (Multi)

We're going to start reserving this space for Ubisoft. *The Division* – initially pegged for a 2014 release – looks like it will slip into 2015. Apparently this is due to development on the game proper not actually having started.

BELOW

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Square Enix**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **2015**



THE XBOX One exclusive entertains the interesting mechanic of focussing on the player character exclusively from a top-down perspective. We assume the game is going to be predominantly based on the roguelike genre, with a little survival-horror thrown in for good measure. The minimalist art style and the unique perspective appeal to us, along with the fact that this is an Xbox One exclusive – we can't get over that part. It seems important.

SECRET PONCHOS

Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Switchblade Monkeys**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2014**



A PS4 exclusive that came into being as a result of Sony's pledge to support indie developers, *Secret Ponchos* is a Western PvP in the vein of *Team Fortress*. The more enemies you take out, the higher your bounty, prompting other players to form allegiances so they can claim your bounty and build their own reputation (which reminds us of how the online in *Homefront* worked before its servers closed).

TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS

Format: **PS Vita**
Publisher: **Sony Computer Entertainment**
Developer: **Gearbox Software, Iron Galaxy Studios**
ETA: **Q4 2013**



DO YOU play as a Psycho Midget going on a soul-searching journey of personal discovery? Do you play as a skag-herder, embarking on a mission of revenge against the Vault Hunter that killed your loyal pack? Do you play as a member of a planet-hopping con team, running heists on the suckers of the wider *Borderlands* galaxy? Who knows? But it's Telltale and it's *Borderlands*, so whatever happens, we want in.

GUNS OF ICARUS ONLINE

Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Muse Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2014**



GUNS OF *Icarus Online* has already launched for the PC, but we're excited about the PS4 version. The game is a steampunk FPS that revolves around you and your friends forming a crew on an airship and maintaining the vessel through dogfights and encounters. You can choose to be an engineer, pilot or gunner – each providing various benefits to the ship (of which there are seven types available).

ODDWORLD: NEW 'N' TASTY

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Oddworld Inhabitants**
Developer: **Just Add Water**
ETA: **2014**



THE REMAKE of the classic *Abe's Oddysee* was made with the target of being at one-to-one quality with CGI films. The game, built in the popular Unity engine, will be 2.5D and fully HD. We're excited about seeing the grim, blood-splattered factory floors of Rupture Farms brought back to life – we just hope the controls operate a little bit more smoothly this time around, especially if we're playing it with our lovely new DualShock 4s.

RUST

Format: **Windows, Mac**
Publisher: **Facepunch Studios**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2014**



THE CREATORS of *Garry's Mod* took the inspiration for *Rust* from *DayZ*, and it shows – the game plays very similarly to the zombie simulator, but rather than fighting off the undead, *Rust* has a more traditional post-apocalyptic setting (think *Metro 2033* or *STALKER*). The game is currently in alpha, and has already made a stunning $7.5 million, selling 150,000 in its first two weeks on Early Access.

PILLARS OF ETERNITY

Format: **PC, Mac**
Publisher: **Obsidian Entertainment**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **Q4 2014**



PILLARS OF *Eternity* is the official name of the Obsidian Kickstarter venture 'Project Eternity'. Featuring a protagonist that can be customised and set in a massive world, *Pillars Of Eternity* looks like an RPG that will satisfy even the most conservative of fantasy fans. Obsidian has stated that the freedom offered by self-publishing allows it to explore 'mature themes' in the game – something we're keen to see materialise.

MASSIVE CHALICE

Format: **PC, Mac**
Publisher: **Double Fine Studios**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2014**



WE LOVE SRPGs here at **games™**. We also love offbeat humour and *Iron Brigade*. Luckily for us, Double Fine Studios managed to fund *Massive Chalice* through Kickstarter last year, which combines all the above elements in a game which is happy to listen to its audience. The option to include same-sex marriage was requested by backers, and the folks at the studio were happy to oblige.

WHY I ❤...

Grand Theft Auto III

MICHAEL DE PLATER, MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS

It was Grand Theft Auto III *for me. That was just mind-blowing in terms of not being railroaded along through a game. I'm actually in a living world and I'm a character inhabiting that world – that was a real turning point for me. It was then unbelievable being able to work with Christian [Cantamessa] who worked on that game. It was also a huge inspiration because Rockstar pushed forward what you can do in an open-world sandbox. When we approached* Middle-earth: Shadow Of Mordor *we thought 'What else can we do in an open world to make it feel like a living breathing world?', and it really inspired us to think 'Okay, what's the next generation of that experience?'*

> "Rockstar pushed forward what you can do in an open-world sandbox"
>
> MICHAEL DE PLATER, MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS



ALL FOR ONE

FOLLOWING THE SUCCESS OF LEFT 4 DEAD, DEVELOPER TURTLE ROCK IS ONCE AGAIN ATTEMPTING TO PUSH THE BOUNDARIES OF BOTH CO-OP AND COMPETITIVE MULTIPLAYER WITH THIS INTRIGUING TAKE ON WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CREATIVE SHOOTER

Asymmetry is hardly a multiplayer shooter buzzword. In fact, in a genre so concerned with balance, fair play and the idea that all players should be treated as equals, asymmetry is something to be shunned. Something, at best, to be prodded and probed from afar with caution and a stick, only to ultimately be discarded as blasphemous to online shooter ideals.

And yet, it should come as no surprise that *Evolve*'s heart and soul revolves utterly and entirely around asymmetry. Why? Because this is a game from Turtle Rock, the team that brought the rightly revered and amiably admired *Left 4 Dead* into our lives – a game that both ignored and rewrote *Standardised Shooters 101* and defined the concept of 'competitive co-op' as something with mainstream appeal and hardcore depth.

Evolve takes *Left 4 Dead*'s competitive co-op base and takes it one step further, splitting the two elements into distinct roles within the same game. On the one side you've got the monster, a team of one boasting overwhelming individual power and the freedom to set about dismantling the opposition in any way they see fit. For the monster, that competitive edge is the key to victory. On the other side are the Hunters, a four-person team made up very much of characters that would fail miserably if tasked with tackling the monster solo. Their strength resides in teamwork and an intimate understanding of their allies' strengths, weaknesses and positioning. For the Hunters, that sense of co-operation is the key to victory.

"Coming off of *Left 4 Dead*, what really stuck around for the team was playing that game in four-player co-op against a tank," explains producer Grace Denby. "That tank was player-controlled and very over-powered, which is kind of where the four versus one idea came from. In turn that snowballed into trying to make things feel more like the boss battle concept that *Evolve* is today."

While there may be similarities in the four-person team structure between *Left 4 Dead* and one-half of *Evolve*, the teamwork aspect really has been taken to the extreme here. Each game as a Hunter sees you play a specific class; Assault, Medic, »

“IF SWITCHING BETWEEN DIFFERENT HUNTER CLASSES FEELS LIKE YOU'RE PLAYING A DIFFERENT GAME, THEN SWITCHING TO THE MONSTER FEELS LIKE YOU'VE SWAPPED GENRES”

■ Teamwork is the Hunters' most valuable weapon, without it you have no chance of victory against the mighty Goliath.

Support or Trapper. Your team of four must be made up of one of each class – there can be no instances of a team having two Medics at the expense of a Trapper, for example. The reason for that is because each class is specialised to an extreme degree, with the Medic not capable of dealing direct damage and the Assault focused so much on attack that even the idea of carrying a band-aid would seem offensive to him.

"In *Left 4 Dead* every character looked different but was kind of the same to play… everyone could have the same weapon, pick up the same items and use them in the same way," says Denby. "The team aspect came from whether you helped your buddies out if they were grabbed, or surrounded or whether or not you decided to share ammo around. *Evolve* feels like a natural evolution of some of those ideas, but with a very big focus on how the teamwork aspect works – everyone has a very specific role and everyone is rewarded for the job that they do in that role."

Each of the classes plays in such a unique way that selecting a different role can feel as though you're playing a completely new game. Getting right in the face of the monster in a bid to deal massive damage as Markov of the Assault class bears no resemblance whatsoever to the more standoffish tactics required of the Trapper class' Griffin. As a Trapper, your role is to unsurprisingly trap the beast, setting up sensors that can detect its movements, shooting it with a harpoon that restricts its movement and by confining it within a mobile force field (known as the 'Mobile Arena') once you've cornered it in a tactically advantageous location.

■ As Markov, it's your job to get in close and deal damage while other members of the team keep you shielded and healed.



Hank, of the Support class, is the only character we played as that can legitimately be described as having a foot in both offensive and defensive arenas, albeit in a very unique way. The strength of the Support class resides entirely in staying away from the heat of battle, keeping breathing space between yourself and the beast to allow you the time and awareness to buff the abilities of your fellow Hunters. While he has access to a gun of mediocre force, his only means of dealing considerable damage is with a missile strike that comes coupled with an extremely long cool-down counter. Miss and you've got a long wait for attempt number two.



■ The Medic's sniper rifle doesn't do direct damage, instead it creates weak points for teammates to exploit.



MEET GOLIATH
WHEN SPACE BEASTS ATTACK

THE ONLY ONE of *Evolve*'s monsters to be revealed so far, Goliath is quintessentially monstrous; he's big, he's physical and he's direct.

In addition to his standard skill-set of melee attacks, scaling vertical surfaces and leaping enormous distances, he can also breath fire, throw rocks that he's ripped from the environment and slam into the ground to create a localised and damaging earthquake.

Goliath is the game's starting monster and, according to Turtle Rock, the easiest to play as. Therefore, he's the one best suited to helping you understand the dynamic of playing alone against a team of Hunters.

Evolve's other monsters, unlocked as you play more matches, are assigned more complex and subtle abilities, thus requiring more experience to utilise effectively.



Seeing Goliath come at you for the first time is an experience as frightening as it is exciting – one that usually ends in retreat or death.



You'll increase your chances of hitting your target if, 1) the Trapper has landed a harpoon hit and accurately deployed the Mobile Arena, 2) the Assault has managed to divert the monster's attention, 3) the Medic has kept the Assault alive long enough for you to launch the strike. Given that level of teamwork and specialisation, it comes as no surprise that Turtle Rock is already seeing the dev team and play-testers gravitating towards certain classes.

"Personally, I only play as the Medic," Denby confides. "I've played the other classes, but I'm best as the Medic and enjoy it more than the other classes. Internally there are a lot of people who have a definite preference and will try to play the same class in every match. Then there are other people that don't really care – they don't mind if they're playing as the monster or a Hunter even, they just want to play *Evolve*. I think the fact that people are specialising to that degree is a good thing, actually. What it shows is that there really is a lot of depth to each class; there's so much to learn about them and figure out how to play as them that you don't get bored."

If switching between different Hunter classes feels like you're playing a different game, then switching to the monster feels like you've swapped genres. The fact that you're playing alone feels isolating, the fact that you're playing as a giant monster feels empowering.

Goliath is the only monster so far to be revealed, but Turtle Rock has confirmed that the final game will feature many different sizes, speeds and designs, each one offering unique tactical advantages. As a hulking alien with gnarled teeth, twisted talons and a focus on sheer brute strength, Goliath is every bit an otherworldly edition of King Kong.

It's not just the focus on individual power that makes Goliath feels so different from the Hunters, though, it's the very nature of taking control of him. His size means that he can't fit through the same gaps that the Hunters can, but it also means he can climb walls and cliffs with only a couple of bounds. When you first get your hands on him it can also feel as though he's moving through the world more slowly, but he's not, he's just taking bigger steps.

Then there's the perspective itself, as Denby explains. "The game had been in development for two years before playing as the monster was changed from first-person to third-person. That was changed because spatial awareness while playing in first-person was a really big problem. The Hunters often surround the monster from all sides, which is a good tactic, but makes it impossible for the monster to work out where they are without having loads of indicators all over the screen. Changing to third-person really was an epiphany moment and it changes the game a lot."

What also changes the game a lot is Goliath's triple-tiered evolution system, which sees him gain more health, deal greater damage and gain extra abilities, but by sacrificing speed and agility. Evolving through the three tiers is achieved by killing and eating the wildlife that roams *Evolve*'s spacious maps. Once full you've maxed out an onscreen EXP bar of sorts, evolution becomes a case of finding a spot safe from the Hunters and triggering a short cocoon phase before emerging as an altered beast. Whether you choose to avoid the Hunters and evolve to level three instantly, or stay at level one and take advantage of your high speed comes down to your preferred playing style. Certainly, as a newbie, we found that obtaining the extra health and strength that level three provides gives you some freedom »

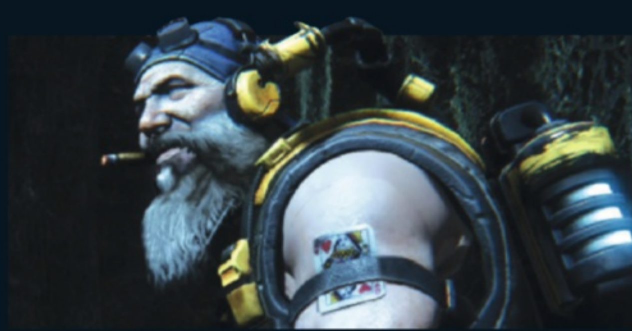
MEET THE HUNTERS

AT PRESENT, ONLY ONE CHARACTER WITHIN EACH OF EVOLVE'S FOUR HUNTER CLASSES HAS BEEN REVEALED, BUT THESE FOUR GIVE A REPRESENTATION OF WHAT WE CAN EXPECT



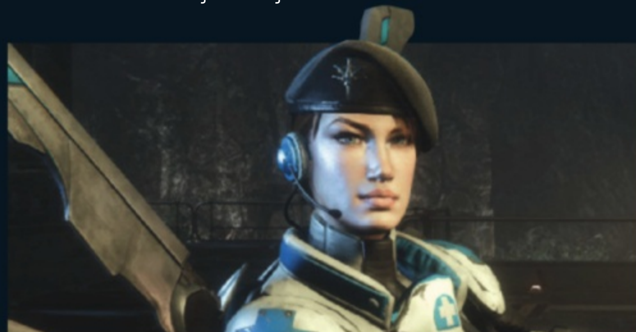
GRIFFIN
CLASS: TRAPPER

■ AS THE CLASS name suggests, its Griffin's job to trap the monster and confine it to an area within which the rest of the Hunters can deal damage. The Mobile Arena trap creates a limited-time force field through which the beast cannot escape and is best deployed in areas featuring high ledges and platforms to give Hunters the chance to stay relatively safe and out of its immediate reach.



HANK
CLASS: SUPPORT

■ HANK IS A mix of both attack and defence and any players taking charge of him will have to quickly master when to hold back and when to get aggressive, a knack made easier thanks to a limited use Cloaking Device that makes you invisible. His Shield Gun is fired at allies and provides them with a significant boost to their defence, best used just as the monster is attacking.



VAL
CLASS: MEDIC

■ KEEP EVERYONE ALIVE, that's Val's job. Her Medgun heals teammates by simply shooting directly at them, while a Healing Burst shockwave heals anyone in its blast radius. She's not exclusively concerned with the well-being of the group, however. An Anti-Material Sniper Rifle doesn't deal damage by itself but it does create weak points which the rest of the team can target and use to take down the monster more efficiently. Her Tranquilizer Rifle slows the monster down.



MARKOV
CLASS: ASSAULT

■ THE BATTERING RAM of the group, Markov is in his element when staring Goliath straight in the face. His Lightning Gun is the most powerful weapon among the group and is capable of taking big chunks of the monster's health if you can get close enough, while his Assault Rifle is reserved for ranged attacks. Markov can place up to seven Arc Mines around the map, which can be extremely effective if well-placed, while a Personal Shield makes him invulnerable for short bursts.

» to make the mistakes that would probably result in death at level one. "Different guys on the team have different tactics. Some people do run away and feed and try to level up and get stronger before wanting to get close to the hunters, other prefer to stay nimble," says Denby.

"We had a game between us in which someone left a decoy of footprints from the starting position, then went into Goliath's stalking mode (which slows him down but hides his footprints) and doubled-back to sit in a tree just behind where the Hunters drop into the map. Everyone was looking at the footprints and trying to work out where he went, while the monster was silently following and eventually picked us all off one by one." The evolution system ties into the pacing of the game. Not one of the eight or nine matches we saw were won or lost in the first encounter between Goliath and Hunters. Depending on how an individual skirmish pans out, one side will try to retreat, regroup and think about a new approach.





■ *Left 4 Dead*'s 'Game Director' has been promoted to 'Zoo Keeper', with new forms of wildlife to take care of.

If you've retreated as Goliath you might decide to go away and try to evolve before taking another stab at wiping the Hunters off of the map, as Hunters you might try to spark an encounter in a different area of the map – perhaps one with more differentiation between elevations to give you more positional options.

That ability to think differently during each encounter became a bit of a theme during our time with the game, the side best able to not only approach things in a variety of ways, but also able to second-guess the opposition, usually coming out on top.

"Every game is really unique," Denby is keen to explain, "and every character and monster is so different, that the sheer number of combinations means there's a lot to learn." Despite the tease of different monsters, he isn't prepared to give away too much information.

> “TURTLE ROCK HAS CONFIRMED THAT THE FINAL GAME WILL FEATURE MANY DIFFERENT MONSTERS, EACH ONE OFFERING UNIQUE TACTICAL ADVANTAGES”

"We're not really wanting to talk about them right now, but they are dramatically different from Goliath. Their abilities and their movements are all very different. You unlock them along a progression path, and it was a very deliberate decision to make Goliath the first monster because he's the easiest to understand. The other monsters are more complex in terms of their abilities and potential strategies."

Denby explains that it's possible to set up games in which the Hunters don't know which type of monster they're up against. "In those kinds of games the opening minutes are not spent trying to figure out how to hunt the monster, it's about working out what kind of monster you're actually hunting. Then you have that first encounter and you realise your idea as to what you're fighting is wrong and you have that immediate fear of knowing the strategy you've planned is not going to work."

Further unpredictability is added by the inclusion of the maps' wildlife, which ranges from the small and annoying to the large and life-threatening – even when playing as Goliath, before you hit evolution stage three, at least, there are animals that pose genuine problems. Rather than placed on the map in entirely pre-determined locations, an AI system known as 'Zoo Keeper' has been designed and implemented to vary animal movements and prevent players from memorising the locations of dangerous wildlife. "Zoo Keeper is an evolution of *Left 4 Dead*'s 'Game Director' idea. We use Zoo Keeper to control the environment and change how it impacts the monster versus Hunter dynamic.

"The Tyrant animal always spawns in the bottom of the pool on the jungle map you played. He lives there, and he's always there and that's an area that's really dangerous to visit. The big sloth-like creatures, though, have areas of the map where they will roam, but within that they don't always act the same way – they move in different patterns, sometimes in groups, sometimes solo and sometimes they just stay put. Plus, different maps have different kinds of animals to worry about."

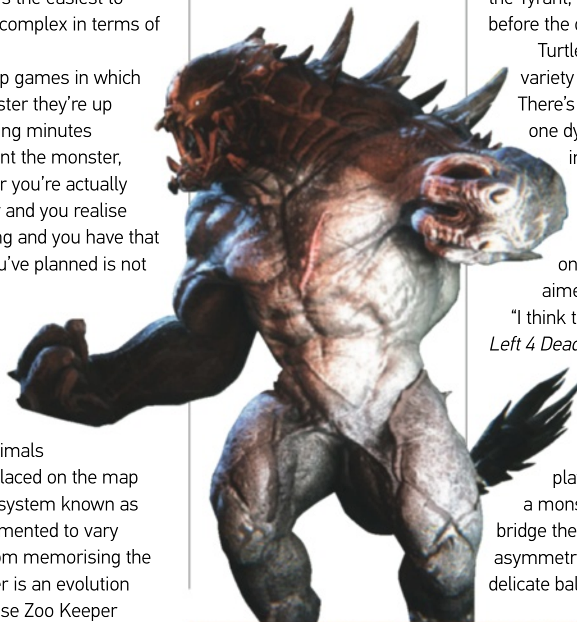
Some of the bigger animals drop perks if you manage to kill them (double damage, for example), but it can be risky to attempt the acquisition of them. In a game playing as Goliath, an indicator popped up saying that two Hunters were dead and were going through the two-minute respawn countdown. Investigating the area revealed that they had been killed by the Tyrant, leaving us to easily pick off the remaining Hunters before the dead pair could return.

Turtle Rock's ability to consistently provide this level of variety and surprise will be the key to *Evolve*'s success. There's simply no denying the fact that the core four vs. one dynamic of monster and Hunters is one of legitimate intrigue. It's harder to say whether or not the asymmetric novelty will wear off down the line. Denby believes a large part of the long-term appeal rests in the fact that *Evolve* is two games in one: one aimed at the team-playing gamer and one aimed at the lone wolf.

"I think that *Evolve* has a broader appeal than *Left 4 Dead*. *Left 4 Dead* was very co-op focused and there were a lot of people that didn't play it because they didn't like playing online as a team and didn't like talking into the headset and relying on other people – I think there's appeal for those kinds of players with playing as the monster." Turtle Rock really will have a monster of a game on its hands if they can manage to bridge the gap between two seemingly separate audiences, asymmetry ironically being the key to achieving such a delicate balancing act.



Goliath breathes fire and his footsteps shake the ground, but can he pick up humans and bite their heads off? It seems a natural thing for a monster to aspire to.



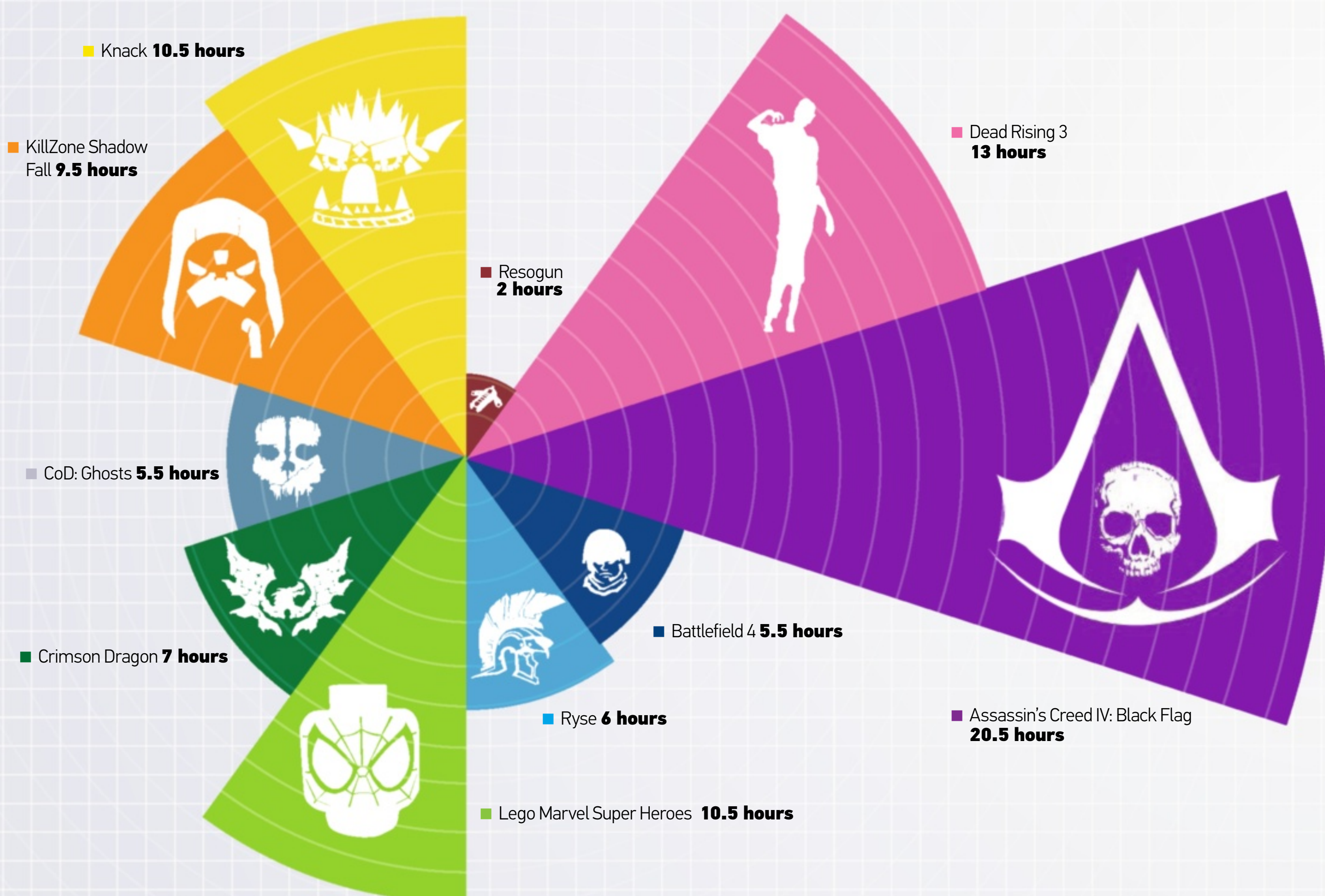




***Evolve*'s gigantic space beast is only one of a number of curious lifeforms Hunters will have to bring down.**

NEXT-GEN IN NUMBERS

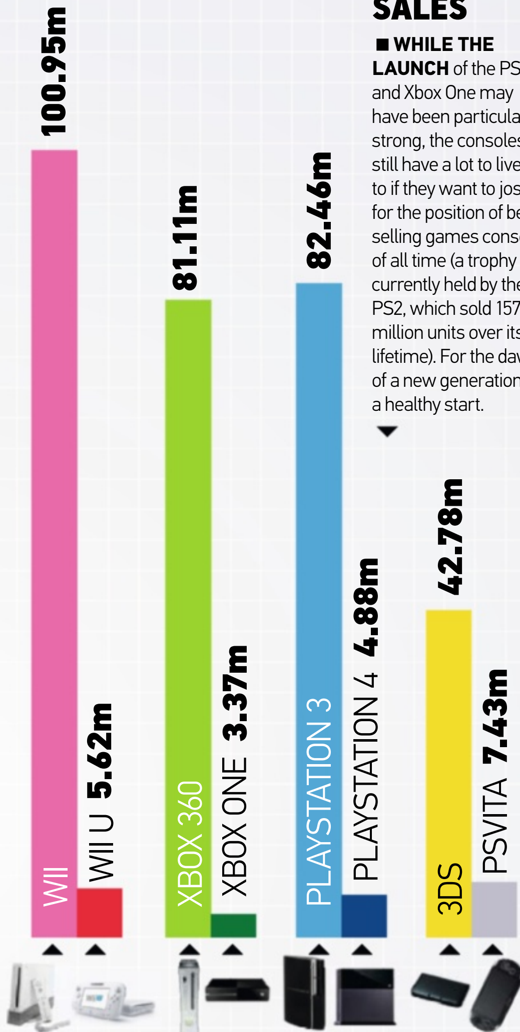
AS THE NEW VIDEOGAMES CONSOLES SETTLE IN, FACTS AND FIGURES FROM THE LAUNCH PERIOD HAVE BEGUN TO SURFACE. FROM PLATFORM-SPECIFIC DATA TO INDUSTRY-WIDE RESEARCH, WE'VE COMPILED A CONCISE AND COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO THE CURRENT STATE OF THE GAMES INDUSTRY FOR YOUR READING PLEASURE...



HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO COMPLETE NEXT-GEN GAMES?

■ **THE PS4 AND** Xbox One launches were some of the most successful in videogames history, with incredible numbers of hardware and software sold worldwide. When you're paying out between £350-£430 for a console and about £50 per game, you want your experience to last... so what's the best next-gen game for value? Which title gives you the most bang for your buck?

- CoD: Ghosts **5.5 hours**
- KillZone Shadow Fall **9.5 hours**
- Knack **10.5 hours**
- Resogun **2 hours**
- Dead Rising 3 **13 hours**
- Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag **20.5 hours**
- Battlefield 4 **5.5 hours**
- Ryse **6 hours**
- Lego Marvel Super Heroes **10.5 hours**
- Crimson Dragon **7 hours**



TOTAL HARDWARE SALES

WHILE THE LAUNCH of the PS4 and Xbox One may have been particularly strong, the consoles still have a lot to live up to if they want to jostle for the position of best-selling games console of all time (a trophy currently held by the PS2, which sold 157.68 million units over its lifetime). For the dawn of a new generation, it's a healthy start.

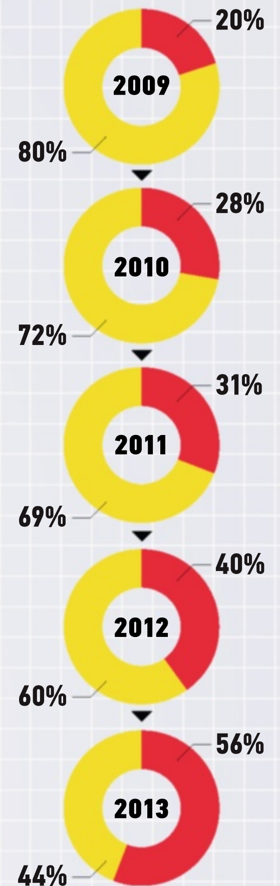
TIME SPENT PLAYING GAMES



Xbox 360 owners
- **34%** non-gaming (Netflix, Youtube, music etc)
- **66%** gaming.



PS3 owners
- **54%** non-gaming (Netflix, Youtube, music etc)
- **46%** gaming



DIGITAL VS. PHYSICAL GAMES SALES

- Digital
- Physical

PLATFORM EXCLUSIVES

WITH THE PS4 selling considerably better than the Xbox One, you'd think it had the stronger and more varied lineup of launch games… but you'd be wrong. The Xbox One has a wider spread of titles, granted, but their reception by the general public and press weren't as largely positive as the PS4's exclusives, meaning Sony's console has the upper hand in terms of aggregate platform-exclusive score.

Game **Average Score Given**

Xbox One Exclusives

- Crimson Dragon **54**
- Dead Rising 3 **78**
- Fighter Within **24**
- Forza 5 **80**
- Killer Instinct **73**
- Powerstar Golf **65**
- Ryse **60**
- Zoo Tycoon **68**

AVERAGE **62.75**

PS4 Exclusives

- Killzone Shadow Fall **73**
- Knack **54**
- Resogun **84**

AVERAGE **70.3**

"LIKE IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY, THE DIGITAL DELIVERY OF GAMES AND ONLINE PLAY IS EXPECTED TO EVENTUALLY OVERTAKE THE SALES OF PHYSICAL PRODUCTS"

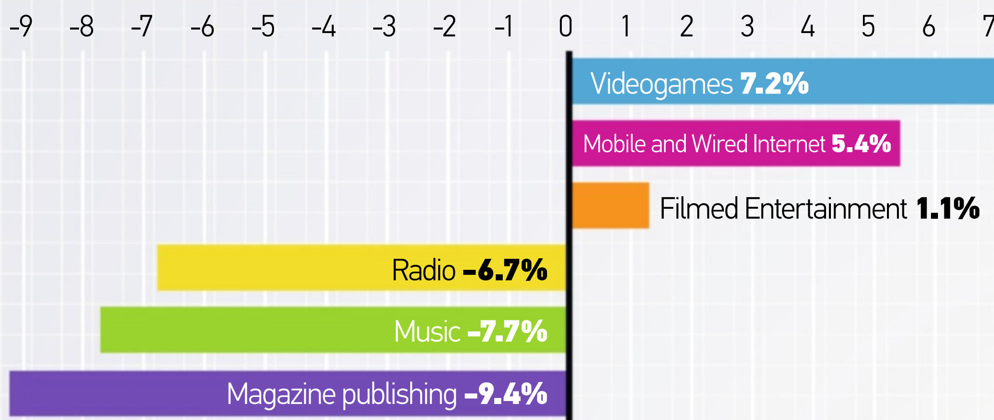
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

(sources: NPO, NPD Group, Games Market Dynamics, Wired. com, thewallstreetjournal.com, onlinemarketingtrends.com, newzoo, venturebeat, ERSB)

VIDEOGAMES INDUSTRY

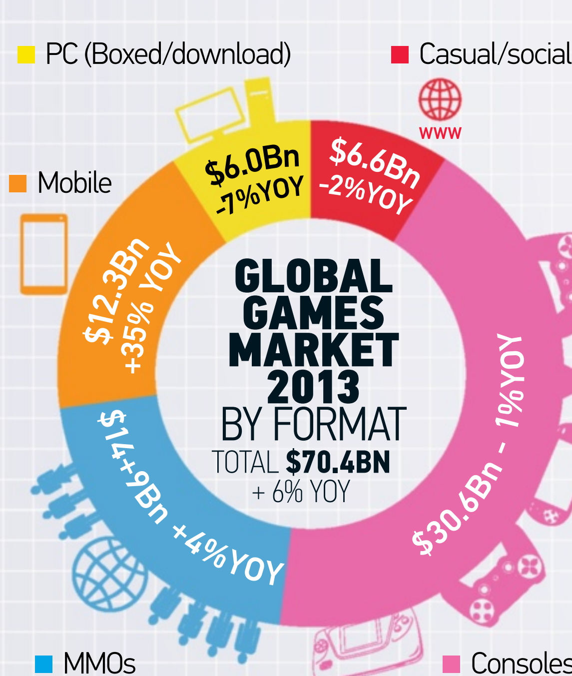
GROWTH OF MEDIA BY SECTOR

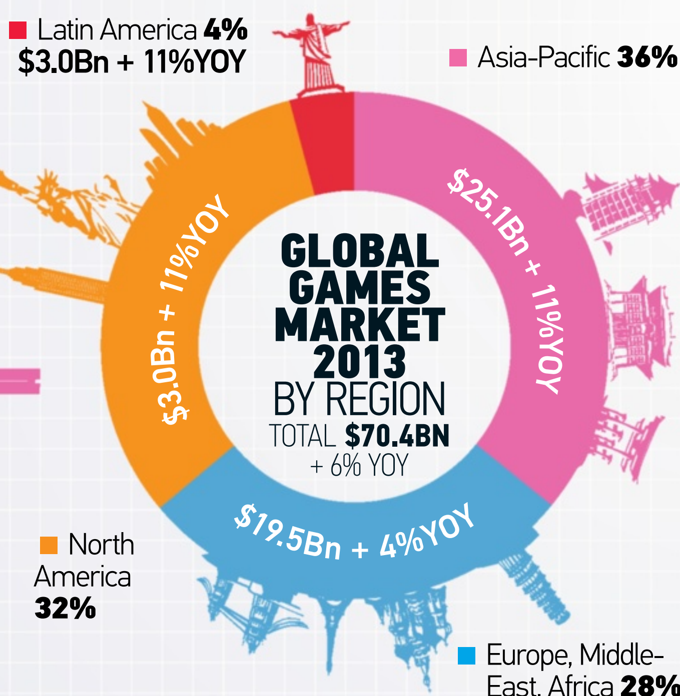
■ **VIDEOGAMES HAVE ALREADY** proven themselves fairly recession-proof, seeing consistent rises and strong profits in most sub-sectors year-on-year. What's surprising is that projected figures state they'll head up the entertainment sector by the end of this financial year, ahead of films, music, TV and magazines (well, that's not really surprising, is it?) After seeing *GTA V* gross $1 billion in 24 hours last year, we can't say we're surprised that more investors are willing to put videogames higher on their priority list than ever before.



AVERAGE AGE OF GAMER 30

36% ARE 36+, **32%** ARE 18-35, **32%** ARE UNDER 18





GLOBAL GAMES MARKET 2013 (BY FORMAT)

■ **WITH SUCH A** big user base willing to shell out for their games, it's easy to think publishers can just release their games into the ether and they'll make money. Unfortunately, it isn't quite as simple as that – by breaking down the market into the different platforms, you can see where the main growth occurs in our industry (unsurprisingly, mobile shows the biggest growth, and that's a trend unlikely to die down any time soon...)

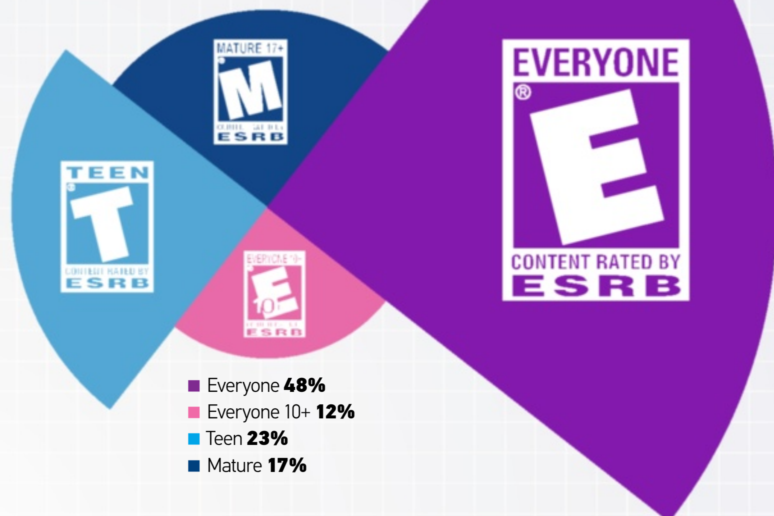
GLOBAL GAMES MARKET 2013 (BY REGION)

■ **GAMING CONTINUES TO** perform well around the world, with not one region seeing a year-on-year loss over the last decade. As other industries suffer, videogames continues to grow. Supported by a loyal following of – typically – adults with plenty of disposable income, publishers know the best way of turning a profit is by keeping their admittedly fickle target audience on-side.

SALES BY ESRB RATING

IT'S NO SECRET that videogames tend to appeal to an older audience – but the 'Mature' ERSB rating is the second lowest selling. The most popular games are rated for 'Everyone', proving that games are indeed child-friendly and don't actually ruin kids' imaginations or minds.

RATING **% OF SALES**

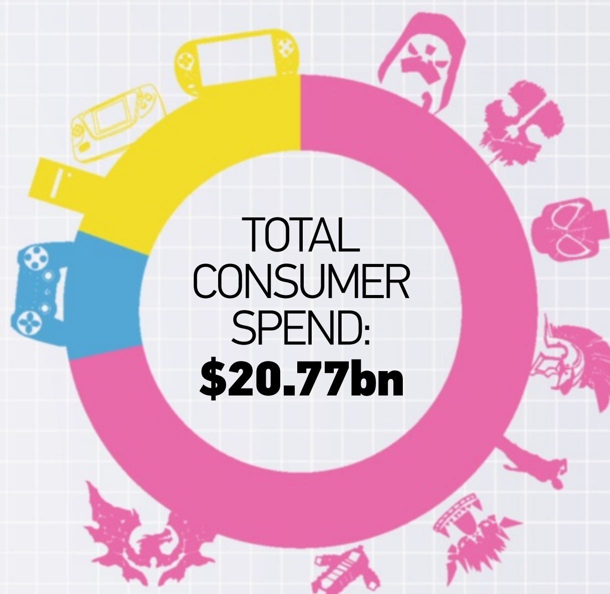


- Everyone **48%**
- Everyone 10+ **12%**
- Teen **23%**
- Mature **17%**

TOTAL CONSUMER SPEND ON GAMES (2012)

HOW MUCH OF our money goes into buying games? A lot of money in the industry floats around in investments, projected sales, sponsorship, marketing, licensing, but at the end of it all, just how much do we, the consumers, pump into the industry annually?

- Content: **$14.8bn**
- Accessories: **$1.93bn**
- Hardware: **$4.04bn**



WEEKLY GAMING

AVERAGE GAMER SPENDS **8 hours** A WEEK PLAYING GAMES (OUT OF 168 HOURS IN A WEEK)



7.2bn Total world population

2.4bn Of which are online

1.2bn Of which are gamers

OUR PLACE IN THE WORLD

GAMERS' GENDERS



(sources: NPO, NPD Group, Games Market Dynamics, Wired.com, thewallstreetjournal.com, onlinemarketingtrends.com, newzoo, venturebeat, ERSB)

STATE OF PLAY

FIVE OF THE MOST PROMINENT CREATIVE VOICES IN INDEPENDENT GAME DESIGN DISCUSS THE PRESSING ISSUES FACING THE INDUSTRY TODAY



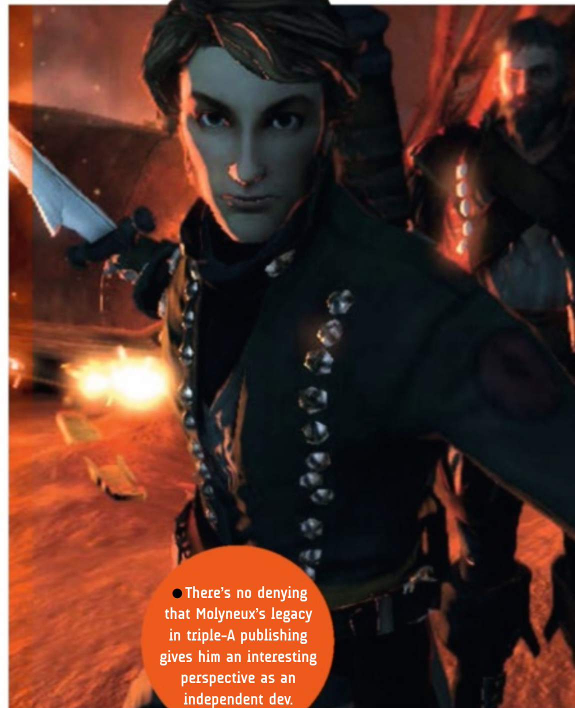
DAN PINCHBECK MIKE BITHELL MIKAEL HAVERI PETER MOLYNEUX CHRIS DELAY

Gathering together five of the most talented, industrious and, crucially, busy developers in one place for a roundtable discussion is no easy task. That's why we didn't. We assembled them on Skype to talk about the turbulent nature of the industry. Peter Molyneux, ex-creative director at Microsoft Game Studios who left to launch indie outfit 22Cans, who had recent success with *Curiosity – What's Inside The Cube?*; Dan Pinchbeck, creative director at The Chinese Room, creator of *Dear Esther* with the upcoming *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*; Mikael Haveri, producer at Housemarque, creator of PS4's *Resogun*; Mike Bithell, creator of *Thomas Was Alone;* and Chris Delay, co-founder of Introversion Software, creator of *Prison Architect*. With each bringing a unique perspective on the topic due to their various methods of setting themselves up in the indie games scene, it's a chance to dig deeper into the whys and hows of the indie games industry, and what works and what doesn't. Despite all sharing a similar standing among the cultural epicentre of independent development, they find themselves chewing on what it is to be indie, the folly of studio development and the shifting tides of media influence. Join **games™** in one of the most insightful and reasoned debates about the games industry as seen by those within it.

● Peter Molyneux's liberation from Microsoft has yielded two creative projects to date: the iOS app *Curiosity* and the upcoming *Godus*.



"'Indie' feels like a label that has been put on us. You could replace it with in some cases with organic development, or start-up. Maybe the best way of describing it is as a way of thinking"
PETER MOLYNEUX



● There's no denying that Molyneux's legacy in triple-A publishing gives him an interesting perspective as an independent dev.

What do you feel are the advantages and challenges inherent to your own individual position within the industry today?
CHRIS DELAY: The thing about being indie is that we don't have to pass our games through any kind of approval process and we don't have to get anyone else to fund our games. We're free to come up with game ideas we want to make and make them.
MIKE BITHELL: I like the freedom as you described. I think the freedom as well, not just the fact that you've not got someone to confirm everything you do but also the freedom to make the type of games that wont be multi-million sellers, the more esoteric stuff. Because you're not taking as much risk financially you can make a game that you're only designing to be appealing to 50,000 people or whatever. But the downside of that is you can't spend as much money and you start to lose the nice toys.
MIKAEL HAVERI: It's your own money invested in your game, so you really have to live by it. That has been difficult at some points. This company has been around for 20 years now and its good to see it still living that indie dream.
PETER MOLYNEUX: I started out as an indie back in the late-Eighties when the term indie hadn't even been defined. For me, the benefit of being indie is that you can experiment and try to invent stuff that has never been experimented or invented before. But you still have a lord and master just like if you're part of a big corporation and your lord and master when you're indie is money. The money has to come from somewhere. If it comes from your own pocket, it's how much you've got in the bank, or if it comes from an investor or government fund – there are always limitations.
DAN PINCHBECK: We've never massively considered ourselves as indie, we see ourselves as a small studio. I think that indie is such a mobile term. Now it's so diverse, there are so many studios that are described as indie and it ranges right up. We're licencing Crytek's technology and they're out there saying 'We are independents'. It's companies from that down to Rebellion down to lone producers, so I'm a little bit wary of the term these days. It can mean so many different things and I'm not sure it's enormously useful.
MB: There's arrogance in the word indie and the rise of the word indie that we've kind of co-opted a history and pretended that we made it up about five years ago.
PM: 'Indie' feels like a label that has been put on us. You could replace it with in some cases with organic development, or start-up. Maybe the best way of describing it is as a way of thinking.

Do you think that definition will continue to shift? The industry has witnessed the death of the double-A game over the last generation and the 'indie' game has filled that gap to some extent.
MB: If *Prison Architect* and a *Twine* game are both indie then that word has lost its meaning, right? The scale of those projects is so far off each other that it becomes a useless word. It becomes, as Peter says, about ethos, which is fine but that's not a genre or a definition of a studio business model – it's more of an adjective culturally.
CD: If you're going to charge 99 cents for a game or free-to-play you can't actually have a triple-A team to develop for that price. It's almost like mobiles only support tiny companies, and tiny companies and indie have always gone hand-in-hand with the woolly definition of what indie might mean.
PM: Then you have people like Supercell and I think they started off maybe within that definition of indie, they had VC support which perhaps colours that definition, but now they're super, super successful but are they still indie? That's the question. I would argue that they are still indie by definition. Like all of these things we start talking about semantics and there isn't a dictionary definition that we can compare ourselves against.
MB: I worry too often that indie just means 'cool' to some people. And that's problematic for a lot of other reasons, right? For someone to be cool someone else has to not be cool. I didn't work in triple-A but I worked in the old double-A business and the team members working in that space were just as passionate and awesome without massive revenue shares that indies get. »



What was your feeling regarding indie support being used during Microsoft and Sony's next-gen console marketing politicking?

MH: Housemarque is a company 50 strong right now and basically we've been working together with Sony making smaller games and at some point the marketing press decided to slap indie on it. We don't mind the label indie but then again, listening to the definitions here we're more of a second-party type players. Not that we pick sides, but we got into the mix of the battle and didn't know we were in it.

PM: I completely understand that Microsoft and Sony thought 'Oh, how can we differentiate our console from the last generation?' and one of the things they put on the list was that they loved indie development.

DP: I think there is a really smart, purely economic business model there as well. When you launch a console platform you want to have a lot of great content on there and if you can have 20 titles for the same price as one title, it doesn't matter if 19 of those titles are turkey as long as one of them is stunning. And if you only have one title at launch and it's turkey you're screwed.

Funding has been a big theme over the last couple of years in the industry, but budgets aren't openly discussed in the industry. Does inflating costs and crowd-funding challenge the way you operate?

MB: I need a project manager, definitely. I assume it's the same with most creative work? You're making things, solving problems, inventing new ideas, you're changing your mind on things and you're throwing out rubbish. It's not like laying bricks, we're going to choose different coloured bricks halfway through and completely rebuild everything. I have no idea how anyone plans out a project. The closer you plan something and the more sure you are about the finite resources you have, probably the more boring game you're going to make because you're locked into decisions day one. I still remember back in the day writing these 200-page game design docs and they were sacrosanct. Those were the commandments. And those do not lead to the best games because you don't solve problems as you go.

DP: I think you can work in the opposite direction where you're thinking about whether you're making a smart design choice. Its not that we can keep going and going, it's more if we want to do this there's an impact to this choice and we have to be sure it's the right choice before we commit to it. We have to consider how long we think this thing we're making is going to take, you have an idea of the ceiling of complexity because of that. I don't think necessarily that you've got this oxidised inflexible design brief, certainly nothing resembling a 200 page design document – it's more like me writing on the back of a fag packet. But you are beholden to someone, you have promised something of a certain quality and you have to deliver it. It would probably be terrible for other people to work within and I think there are systems that we'd be terrible to work under.

MH: In the end, the budget is the best estimate and then when you get it done you correct it, and you change the numbers as you adapt instead of how it was supposed to happen. Especially for us when you've got 50 workers and you've got to pay their wages, you need to understand how much money you're gonna be getting and using. When you run out of money you look for other alternatives, but it's good to know that you think you know what you're doing to some extent.

DP: We were going through an early process of trying to get the contract signed and we were negotiating with Sony on getting a prototype when we stopped thinking in terms of 'This is how much money we have' and started thinking in terms of weeks until we started firing people. Then you look at the people you work with and think 'I really trust and respect and like these people' I don't want anyone to lose their job. Yeah, it can be sobering but it's the good kind of sobering. You do have a responsibility to them as much as you do your fans.

PM: My rule with budgeting and Kickstarter is don't be greedy; don't try to fund the entire development, just look at it being a step. There's such a hard cliff if you don't reach a funding target you full off the end and it's very hard to recover from that. It may be better to start with half your development budget and hope that people are excited enough, so that you can maintain a full development budget through stretch goals and then look at something like open access to bridge that gap that's



Mike Bithell spent years in what he called the 'double-A' studio system, before breaking out and starting a career as an indie dev.

"I think games journalism and games press is utterly crucial up until release... But I think the second your game comes out and reviews have hit that immediately flips over to YouTube"

MIKE BITHELL

Introversion Software's funding choice of crowd-sourcing has made *Prison Architect* an unprecedented success.



Indie is a nebulous term to describe a game that categorising what exactly makes a title indie has become increasingly difficult to define.

Despite each developer being indie, they all have either come from a studio background or collaborated with major publishers.







● The importance of Metacritic and similar sites is a big issue in the industry today: should publishers base bonuses on review scores?

there. It's a wonderful system and I would say to anyone don't be greedy, be very clear about what you want and ask yourself the most important question about any design: who is going to be excited by it?

Where do you stand on sites like Metacritic, where big publishers panic when their scores dip below 70?

DP: I think if you start messing around with peoples' bonuses and base them on an aggregated score and Metacritic then you're a brainless idiot and should be fired.

MB: Hear, hear!

CD: Has anybody actually done this? Has any company ever changed someone's bonus as a result of the Metacritic score?

MB: I have worked on games, that I won't name, where the publishers have given bonuses to the development company based on their ability to hit Metacritic targets. Not on an individual basis but obviously if you benefit a company, then the employee blah blah blah…

CD: I don't get it. Why wouldn't they base it on sales? That would be a rational metric for the bonus.

MB: I think developers to an extent brought it on ourselves. The sales of the game are largely dependent on the publishers, the market spend and a lot of things the development has no power over. So I have a feeling that developers did this that some developer walked into a room with a publisher and said 'Don't judge us on sales, that's your problem. Judge us on Metacritic.' And I guarantee this is where this all came from, someone trying to help developers and completely missing the bloody point!

DP: It's absolute garbage. Its damaging to games, it's damaging to game development and it's idiocy. And frankly if you buy a game on the basis of a score then you're an idiot and you deserve everything you get if you buy a game you don't like. You should be reading about the games, finding reviewers and review outlets that you like and trust and you feel an affinity for, and you should actually be listening to what the content of what something is about.

MB: I like to think indie game fans are slightly more nuanced and actually read the reviews rather than just look at the numbers.

CD: I'm not sure they do. I think they watch YouTube. How many people spend all day watching *DayZ* streams and *Starcraft* played online? That has become such a major form now of game viewing.

MB: I owe *Thomas Was Alone*'s success to a Total Biscuit video. A 20-minute YouTube video changed my life. That's the reality.

CD: It has the power to make or break you.

Do you think the perception of media influence is shifting from a consumer/developer perspective?

MB: I think it did a couple of years ago and we didn't notice. In terms of who can have the most influence on whether my game is a success or not it has been YouTubers for at least a year or more. I did an interview and compared it to *Sight And Sound* magazine versus *Film 2013* on the television. In order for a film to be on *Film 2013* it needs to probably be in *Sight And Sound* magazine, but the reason people go to see a film on Friday night is because they saw it on the television. I think games journalism and games press is utterly crucial up until release for building up hype and expectation and explaining to players what you're working on. But I think the second your game comes out and reviews have hit that immediately flips over to YouTube. That's where you become a cultural thing people are talking about. Right now the games press isn't getting that side of the equation in terms of the headspace of players.

MH: If you look at the sense of having a PC game and the YouTubers take over after launch, if you look at a PS4 game we just got streaming on consoles. Now you can enjoy the experience of somebody playing it live but there's a grey area of can we can do with YouTube videos on Sony's or Microsoft's side. They included streaming but we get a lot of questions of how we can monetise »



● The Chinese Room's Dan Pinchbeck struggles to find the logic in placing any merit in aggregated scores.





● *Thomas Was Alone* creator Mike Bithell states that YouTube 'Let's Play' videos have b had a substantial impact on his games.

this and so on. It's not there yet and I can see it getting to where it is on PC in the near future, but consoles are lacking post-launch visibility.

DP: We've had an up and down relationship with some of the more popular YouTubers and it never hurt us because I think what we realised was that it doesn't matter if certain people out there are slagging our games off because they're slagging them off to an audience who wouldn't buy our games in the first place. What YouTube has done that is really amazing is create another platform for small communities and subcultures, which means you don't have these thin bottlenecks of distribution and marketing. And that's something to really celebrate. That plays into the favour of small studios and niche markets, because you don't have to buy your way into visibility effectively, you just have to find your people.

MH: It does scare the bigger guys. Microsoft have this whole sponsorship deal with Machinima, which means they're dipping their toe into that area but it's a scary place. They don't want the negativity; they want to maintain a sense of control.

MB: That's ridiculous, that's like walking into the





"It's about understanding the playing field and not trying to milk the different alternatives but calculating the different things you'll do"

MIKAEL HAVERI

playgrounds of England and telling children off. It's word of mouth! Even when your stuff gets negative coverage, lets say I'm aware some YouTubers weren't that keen on *Dear Esther,* they were talking about it and putting that video up and a lot of people, if you read the comments, were disagreeing with those guys. Consumers are smart. They get it. They're actually making decisions and I guess that scares marketing departments.

DP: Also there's a risk behind it. If you're a big corporation and you have a lot of money sloshing around, you're a big target for legal action. No one is going to sue a company our size because someone said something in the comment section of YouTube – there's no point because they wont make any money. But if you can pin a comment made in a section on a big player like Microsoft or Nintendo, you stand a chance to potentially get an out of court settlement. So, we are protected by our small scale from things that big companies… and again it's not through big companies being dumb or slow, they're just a different animal to us and they have advantages we don't have and we have advantages they don't have.

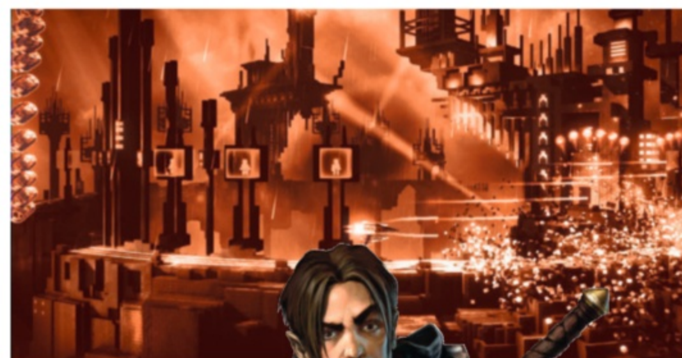
Finally, would you advise others trying to enter the industry now to take the same course as you did when you began creating games?

CD: We started in 2001, so I wouldn't recommend they go into HMV and ask about stocking a DVD boxed unit. That's silly. The market has changed a long way since then. I think that for a new indie game developer, for new creative people who want to make games, my personal opinion is the PC is the home platform and Steam is the place to be if you're a game maker. We see every time we do an update that fans of our games universally love receiving updates to their game. It's not as we feared where they hate the fact that they have paid for it and it's not finished yet. It's the other way around: they love



Resogun was a big software success story of the PS4 launch. Yet, Mikael Haveri debates whether Housemarque can be considered indie.





Has the advent of Kickstarter and other crowd-sourcing funding options changed the perception of the industry from the inside? It's clear that there's not any one system that is suitable for every developer.

getting updates. And at the same time we're effectively funding the game during development. I think that's such a strong business proposition and that's the most sensible place to be as a new game developer.

MH: I was involved with some 19, 20-year-old kids in a two-man team and they started making games in game maker and releasing them on Android. Finland is a big scene now but it wasn't then. They made a lot of games and weren't afraid to fail but now they've reached Greenlight success and are in the Humble store. It's about understanding the playing field and not trying to milk the different alternatives but calculating the different things you'll do.

DP: I would say you've got a lot to learn if you're starting out in the industry and you don't want to make all your mistakes in a very public place. So don't bite off more you can chew, work your way through it and don't expect to succeed first time around. There are a lot of successful indies that seem to come out of nowhere, but usually they have been given a fair amount of time learning their craft and banging their head against the wall before they break through. So there's a bit of an illusion right now that you can explode onto the scene with your first game and that's not representative of how we got here.



"I owe Thomas Was Alone's success to a Total Biscuit video. A 20-minute YouTube video changed my life. That's the reality"

MIKE BITHELL



DOES KICKSTARTER WORK?

WITH BIG NAME KICKSTARTER PROJECTS NOW FINALLY AVAILABLE FOR THEIR BACKERS AND CUSTOMERS ALIKE, HOW HAS THE SERVICE BEEN RECEIVED AND HAS IT SURVIVED SOME OF THE INEVITABLE CONTENTIOUS ISSUES THAT COMES FROM SEEKING FUNDING FROM A FAITHLESS CROWD? **GAMES™** INVESTIGATES TO DISCOVER IF KICKSTARTER HAS BEEN A SIGNIFICANT SUCCESS FOR THE INDUSTRY, OR WHETHER IT'S LITTLE MORE THAN A FAD ON THE WAY OUT

RIGHT Inspired by hokey sci-fi and *Game Dev Story*, *Star Command* was an early poster child for crowd-funding, until the developers took to Kickstarter for a second time and alienated many of its own fans.



STAR COMMAND

RIGHT Eyebrows were raised when inXile requested $900,000 to revive its pre-*Fallout* RPG, but the strength of the development team and the promise of a new post-apocalyptic adventure ensured a $3m investment.



WASTELAND 2

RIGHT Space games have been resurgent thanks to Kickstarter. The developer of *FTL* asked for a mere $10,000 to complete its roguelike adventure, but ended up with more than $200,000 and a stellar hit game to boot.



FTL

PILLARS OF ETERNITY



LEFT It might not look like much, but fans of classic RPGs like *Baldur's Gate* or *Icewind Dale* are probably drooling at the prospect of playing *Pillars Of Eternity*. And it wouldn't have happened without Kickstarter.

GODUS



LEFT When *Godus* first became available for backers a lot were unhappy with the results since it felt a little too much like a time-restricted social game. Changes have been made, of course, and wouldn't have been possible without that early interaction.

ELITE: DANGEROUS



LEFT Alpha players already have their hands on *Elite: Dangerous*, and early reports suggest it's exactly what you might expect from a sequel to the seminal space trading game. The game should be officially released later this year.



t over 200 million dollars, gaming is the most funded category on Kickstarter, followed closely by film and television projects, design and – at nearly half that value – technology. Impressive, right? These are the stats that Kickstarter advertises, but a closer look suggests not all is as rose-tinted as it might first seem. Spread across over 8,000 gaming projects, that 200 million dollars has gone to only 2,800 projects each of varying size and scope. With a 35 per cent success rate, the crowdfunding service isn't the guaranteed victory it is often portrayed as. It's easy to overlook the fact that Peter Molyneux's *Godus* practically limped over the finish line, Android console Ouya has amounted to very little in spite of the 8.5 million it raised and not forgetting the multitude of small-scale projects that frankly don't even get considered due to their supposed lack of quality, intangible evidence of the game's current status or simply the fact that they don't have a developer's name on which to ride the coattails of.

Yet, for better or worse, Double Fine kickstarted Kickstarter in early 2012 with its proposed classic adventure game, spurring the crowdfunding site's popularity – at least for videogames – beyond the meagre successes it had been used to before. *Wasteland 2* and *The Banner Saga* followed shortly after, benefitting from this sudden upsurge in interest. Both were then superceded by a series of notable triumphs that culminated with Obsidian Entertainment's *Project Eternity* garnering a then-record-breaking four million dollars. That was 2012, which Kickstarter dubbed 'the Year of the Game'. Now with many of these hugely popular games releasing to the masses – a feat that, arguably, couldn't have happened without Kickstarter – is this a new era for videogame publishing, or just a gold rush coming to an end? Is crowdfunding deemed a success?

"It's been wonderful and morale-boosting for us as developers," claims Chris Avellone, creative director at Obsidian and key developer behind the Kickstarted game now known as *Pillars Of Eternity*. "Players get a voice again," he adds, "before the fact rather than after, and can spend money to see games they want to see get made, games that may not ever have had a chance to be made in a traditional publisher model." Speak to any developer these days – even those without first-hand experience with Kickstarter – and it's clear there's a change in the air. Whether it's crowdfunded titles, those alphafunded either by themselves or through Steam Early Access or even big-budget triple-A games, developers are becoming much more open with their fans – a factor that can be traced back to the 2012 surge of Kickstarter's popularity.



Kickstarter was ticking along with a videogames section long before Double Fine launched its first Kickstarter project. After that it's been far more popular and has dramatically changed the industry.



Underwater adventure *The Big Blue* only managed to interest 867 backers, despite coming from the creators of *Ecco The Dolphin*.

Famed developer Peter Molyneux shares this sentiment, believing that the process of iteration with a community of fans to be far greater for a game than solitary development – as he often terms it – in an ivory tower. "We chose to go Kickstarter because, well there were two huge reasons," starts Molyneux. "The first reason was that the more people you involve in making a game the more likely it is you're going to make a great game. You know people have said this for years and years, at the concept stage, 'Do you think this is cool? Do you like this bit and not that bit?' So we went on this road, which really started with Kickstarter, then we moved to Early Access on Steam, then moved to more of an update culture and that has been an incredible amount of hard work, it has been insanely scary."

> "It's like standing naked in front of your first date, it has been insanely scary"

It's a new challenge for developers: no longer are they free to tweak and alter their concepts in isolation, but instead they need to evolve their game in front of a watchful audience. "It's like standing naked in front of your first date," claims Molyneux of this new approach to game development, "you've got nothing to hide behind. It's definitely not for the faint hearted. If I did a Kickstarter again I'd do it very differently because of that. But it is the new world we are in, it's the new world where designers have to be more than ideas people, they have to be creators of ideas as much as having ideas of their own. Kickstarter and Early Access is a wonderful way of doing that."

This is all well and good, but what about that forgotten 65 per cent? What of those Kickstarter projects that didn't manage to achieve their funding? If this is such an idyllic means of game development, it doesn't yet seem viable for every developer, and why – in particular – have so many failed where others have achieved huge success? "A project has to grab the imagination of the potential backers," believes David Braben, whose *Elite: Dangerous* was successfully funded in January 2013. "People have to really want it," he adds. "There have been successful projects by one person no-one has heard of, and unsuccessful ones based around known IP but that feel unimaginative or retro. It may well be the case that to attract the big sums you do need to have a 'hook', but that is the case in just about every field and Kickstarter is just another manifestation of that principle. Kickstarter »



After a successful campiagn Uber Entertainments's *Planetary Annihilation* joined Steam's Early Access list.

itself does give coverage to projects people might not otherwise have heard about, but as long as such projects don't ask for very large amounts of money, they stand a good chance of success." The *Elite: Dangerous* Kickstarter itself was looking for £1.25 million in funding, and though it ended on £1.5 million it had – for a long while – not looked as though it was going to make it. Was it the large target that put potential backers off? "Perhaps," says Braben, "but the key thing is that to develop a game like *Elite: Dangerous* will cost many millions, so we had to set the level at the point at which we would want do the game. If we were to have set it at below that level, it would have been the wrong thing to do – we'd have been committing to a game for which the size of the audience was unclear." Yet even in spite of this success, David Braben and Frontier Developments announced last year that the company was admitted to the London Stock Exchange, causing a sense of mistrust in *Elite: Dangerous*' backers who believed that their investment in the game was being put at risk. "Some thought it was a good thing – and invested in the company too – but there were also some negative comments, as you'd expect." Despite that, Braben knows that this move was not only better for Frontier, but for the game too. "Going to the stock market is a fundamentally good thing for *Elite: Dangerous* as it allows us to put in place a great deal of infrastructure to make the game phenomenal, way beyond what the Kickstarter alone could fund."

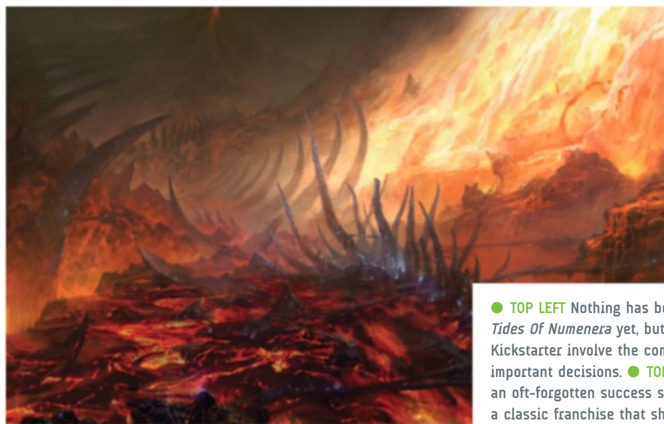
But not everyone is quite so positive about Kickstarter. "I have a different view," says Mike Bithell, developer of *Thomas Was Alone*. "I think it's an amazing platform for the right people. I would suggest that Peter [Molyneux] is the perfect person to go on Kickstarter, people who are respected and known and have fans who understand what their game will be. That's a

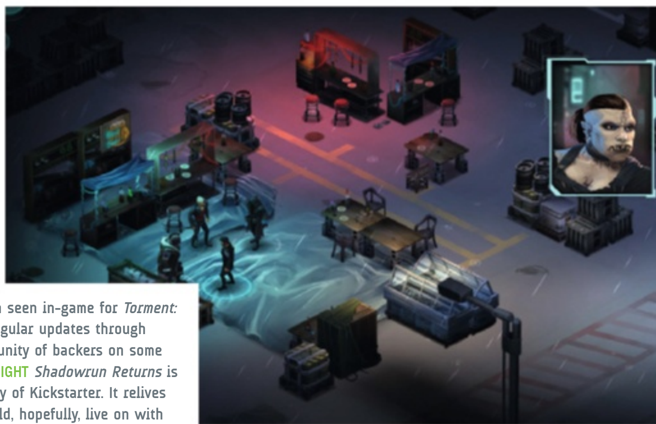
IT'S A CLASSIC

How Kickstarter is reviving some ailing genres

There's a wide variety to the games that are funded on Kickstarter, but its greatest asset is perhaps the opportunity it provides to age-old genres. RTS games and point-and-click adventures are particularly popular on Kickstarter, but the real winners are fans of classic RPGs. The minds behind the likes of *Baldur's Gate* and the original *Fallout* Brian Fargo and Chris Avellone have collected over 11 million dollars in funding for *Project Eternity* (now *Pillars Of Eternity*), *Torment: Tides Of Numenera* and *Wasteland 2*, proving that fans of those old-school PC RPGs are willing to throw their money at developers worth their salt for a brand new classic RPG. It wouldn't have been possible without Kickstarter.











TOP LEFT Nothing has been seen in-game for *Torment: Tides Of Numenera* yet, but regular updates through Kickstarter involve the community of backers on some important decisions. TOP RIGHT *Shadowrun Returns* is an oft-forgotten success story of Kickstarter. It relives a classic franchise that should, hopefully, live on with further entries later on down the line. BOTTOM RIGHT *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* is the latest Kickstarter success story, with developer Warhorse successfully getting funding for its traditional medieval sim/RPG. BOTTOM LEFT *Godus* was publicised in part by Molyneux's earlier creation, *Curiosity – What's Inside The Cube?*, with the winner taking on a vital role in *Godus*.



A salient point, in fact. It was ironic that – having smashed its original goal of 400,000 dollars – Double Fine needed to release its Kickstarted game *Broken Age* in two parts, in a bid to gain additional funding on top of the three million dollars earned through its original Kickstarter funding. It was as close to an outrage Kickstarter has received from the videogame industry as fans demanded explanations, insulted that after octupling its goal Double Fine should need more. The developer had even successfully funded another Kickstarter project, *Massive Chalice*, and run the experimental pitching process Amnesia Fortnight whereby fans voted on games conceived and – ultimately – designed by individual developers at Double Fine. With all this going on, was it fair to split its game up to try and get even more money for *Broken Age*? "It was a bit of a surprise," admits Braben, "especially when they cleared their funding target by such a generous margin. It perhaps suggests they didn't have a detailed plan in place at the start, or, more likely, their plans changed as they went through development. Having said that, I think they have been pretty open and contrite about it."

Perhaps that's the only way to be when delivering bad news for an extremely well-known crowdfunded project, but has this had an effect on the image of Kickstarter as a whole? Brian Fargo – developer of *Wasteland 2* and CEO of inXile Entertainment – believes there has been no negative scar inflicted on Kickstarter by Double Fine's controversial move. "It doesn't appear that there is a permanent ripple in the force of goodwill for Kickstarter-backed games," claims Fargo, "and ultimately I believe that if Tim delivers a quality game (which it appears he has) to all of his backers then they will forgive the process for getting there." It's hard to deny that the release of *Broken Age Part 1* passed by fairly innocuously, with few recalling the decision for a staggered launch; as is common with the games industry, memories are incredibly short. "Crowdfunding really peels back the layers on the difficulty and imperfect process of making a game that most people are not familiar with," states Fargo, suggesting that it is in fact the openness of the system that many – backers included – need to learn to understand. "There has not been a single event in Kickstarter-produced games that has not previously occurred with publishers handling the finances and management, it's just that it's transparent now."

> "People are going on Kickstarter who will fail because they're not known"

great platform for those guys." Instead Bithell believes that the attitude towards Kickstarter has changed and thanks to the high-profile successes other developers believe there's a limitless fountain to draw from. "I actually worry that because of the gold rush and because people have seen so much success on Kickstarter with the big names, people are going on there who will either fail because they're not known or not seen and will be wasting time on that platform." Bithell's biggest concern, however, are the more inexperienced developers who "don't really understand the game they're making, or the game they're promising". In this regard the view of Kickstarter has changed from the unknown indie developer looking to pay for the costs of software to grander concepts that – while interesting – would not get approval through the traditional publishing route. And that's the crux of it, ultimately; Kickstarter fulfils that need to get a game funded. Molyneux admits that Kickstarter was considered not only for its ability to connect with those that would ultimately play his game, but also to get the money necessary to make it. "I don't think unless you're Chris Roberts [developer of *Star Citizen*] who has done amazingly well – I don't quite understand how he has done so well but he's done an incredible job of raising 34 million dollars – I don't think many people who Kickstarted would absolutely cover their costs. You only have to look at Double Fine going back at least once asking for more money."



2.1 million dollars of *Star Citizen*'s funding came from Kickstarter. It has now achieved upwards of 34 million through its own website as well.

THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF KICKSTARTER

THOSE PROJECTS THAT STOOD OUT THE MOST, WHETHER FOR THEIR MASSIVE SUCCESS OR EPIC FAILURE



OUYA

$8.5 million

A weird one here since while the Kickstarter project for Android gaming console Ouya was a phenomenal success during the funding stage, it has since become something of a joke now. Few new games are released for the console, and without that, the dream could soon be over.

FAILURE

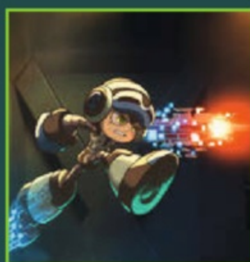


TORMENT: TIDES OF NUMENERA

$4.1 million

As the most-funded game on Kickstarter, *Torment* is a spiritual successor to classic RPG *Planescape: Torment*. InXile has proven it has what it takes with *Wasteland 2*, so don't think this will be a one-off – it's a rebirth of the *Torment* series, don't you doubt that.

SUCCESS



MIGHTY NO 9

$3.8 million

Hopeful the suits at Capcom are worried, because if they won't approve a new *Mega Man* game then someone should. And thankfully *Mighty No 9* is *Mega Man* in all but name, proving the series is still adored by fans and with Keiji Inafune at the helm, it'd be unfair to expect disappointment.

SUCCESS



THE BANNER SAGA

$723,887

Thanks to Kickstarter, Stoic will be able to comfortably produce the remaining two entries in *The Banner Saga* without any financial pressure. Knowing crowdfunding helped turn something this unique into a series is more than a little heartwarming.

SUCCESS



CLANG

$526,125

Realistic sword fighting game *Clang* actually met its goal and was looking promising, up until September 2013 where developer Subutai revealed that despite this success, development would be paused since it simply didn't have any more money for the project. Nothing has been heard since.

FAILURE



WILDMAN

$504,120

It came out during *Wildman*'s funding stage that Gas Powered Games – creator of *Total Annihilation* – was nearly bankrupt, and the company's future relied on the Kickstarter. This backfired, with those that backed it feeling lied to. Funding failed and Gas Powered Games is now, sadly, no more.

FAILURE



TROPES VS WOMEN

$158,917

Controversy surrounded Anita Sarkeesian's video series about women and videogames, in part due to gamers that beset her with vile sexist remarks on various social media outlets. It proved a point, if nothing else, and helped decimate Anita's humble goal of 6,000 dollars.

SUCCESS



DIAMOND TRUST OF LONDON

$90,118

Jason Rohrer is a name we're hearing more and more of these days (more recently for *The Castle Doctrine*), and a part of that is thanks to his Kickstarted spy strategy game for the DS. It may not have earned global acclaim, but it gathered enough to give development a boost.

SUCCESS



DIZZY RETURNS

$25,620

£350,000 might have been a bit of a stretch for a new *Dizzy* game, but after a surprisingly successful iOS remake the same year it's not unfair for the Oliver Twins to assume there was some nostalgia left for the adventuring egg. Sadly not, it seems; the Kickstarter amounted to almost nothing.

FAILURE



MYTHIC: THE STORY OF GODS AND MEN

$4,739

Things were looking swell for Little Monster Productions until the project was unexpectedly cancelled. It turns out many of the assets used in the pitch had been stolen – we can only presume there was no intention to make the game at all.

FAILURE

So if Double Fine's decision – and arguably the most high-profile controversial event of Kickstarter's videogame history – can pass us by with barely a squeak, are developers free to get away with whatever unscrupulous act they like when the funds have already been coughed up by a forgiving audience? Ultimately, should we be more distrustful of those that we pay through Kickstarter? "No," says Chris Avellone, then adding, "and yes, if doubts exist. If you're keeping the public informed of your progress and the steps along the way then they already have insight into the progress, and you're helping form expectations, which every Kickstarter project should be doing. Even if you and the backers may not agree on a conclusion and it may not be ideal for everyone, the amount of transparency allows backers to see why it makes sense to make the decision you did, which normally you can't discuss in more traditional publisher models." Again we come back to this need for openness, as Frontier Developments was about its decision to move to the London Stock Exchange, or as Double Fine was with its early release of *Broken Age*.

Braben echoes the sentiment: "The whole ethos of Kickstarter is one of trust – essentially of trust in those being backed who want to make their dreams come true. There will inevitably be failures from time to time, but it is beholden on those that are backed to do their best to ensure their loyal backers are rewarded for that trust." Brian Fargo suggests that the initial trust comes from the original pitch, and that "hearing a developer passionately pitch their vision and knowing how important it is has an impact on me and, I believe, others." It's this pitch – and its overall confidence – that sets the tone for any Kickstarter project, believes Fargo: "I'm not sure what the percentage of games funded versus delivered are but I've had very few go sideways and the ones that did work more than made it up to me, but in general I look to see if the overall pitch seems robustly thought out so that I have confidence that the team can deliver for the funding level they're asking."

> "It suggests Double Fine didn't have a detailed plan in place at the start"





The popularity that *The Banner Saga* received on its launch only helped solidify the developer's future, and proved to be solidly planned out.

Of the developers we spoke to, each of them said that they would return to Kickstarter for a second project – and in the case of Brian Fargo and Chris Avellone, have already done so. It seems the experience has been a positive one for all involved: from the initial launch, community involvement during development and, then, the final product reaching the gamers – whether they backed or not. So, what is the future for crowdfunding, then? Is it now a permanent part of our industry? "Crowdfunding development is here to stay," says Brian Fargo, very matter-of-factly. "There are plenty of great games that are delivering on their promise for audiences that want something different than would be available otherwise. If we all continue to materially deliver then I see no reason why it would do anything but continue to grow." It's early days yet, but Avellone shares Fargo's thoughts on Kickstarter's future: "As more and more people become comfortable with the service – and I'd argue that a lot of the movie projects, like the *Veronica Mars* movie, drew people unfamiliar with Kickstarter and how donations work and made them more aware of it – I expect that as time goes on, budgets should advance to the point where it might even be possible to get triple-A titles funded through Kickstarter and see them reach completion." And if it means that gamers will be the ones to have final say on the direction the industry takes, voting directly with our wallets, then we're all for it.



With *Ultima* out of his control, *Shroud Of The Avatar* is Richard Garriott's attempt to build a new kind of RPG.

MIAMI VICE

A SHOT OF ADRENALINE TO THE INDIE SCENE, HOTLINE MIAMI COMBINED CLASSIC GAMEPLAY VALUES WITH A PUNISHING DIFFICULTY CURVE, CATAPULTING PLAYERS THROUGH A GAUDY FEVER DREAM OF MASK-WEARING SERIAL KILLERS AND EIGHTIES KITSCH. WITH HOTLINE MIAMI 2: WRONG NUMBER ON THE HORIZON, **GAMES™** CHATS WITH CREATORS DENNIS WEDIN AND JONATAN SÖDERSTRÖM ABOUT VIOLENCE, CONTROVERSY AND THE DUO'S EDGY REPUTATION



Dennis Wedin and Jonatan Söderström didn't set out to make headlines. In fact, the duo otherwise known as Dennaton Games has been actively avoiding them – though without much success. "We want to do the exact opposite of that," Söderström tells us, talking about the studio's controversial reputation – recently by including one scene in its recent *Hotline Miami 2* demo that depicted an attempted sexual assault on a woman, only for it to be revealed as a staged scene in a film production. "We thought people would expect the game to try and be more controversial and I guess that's part of what that scene is about," he reasons of the meta-moment that seemingly backfired and has been removed. "The fact is we're not going down and making things even worse than the first game. We're trying to make the violence a little bit more emotional, make it feel different but fleshing out the characters more."



Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number has had its launch shuffle. It's now due during the Spring.

The original *Hotline Miami* was hoisted onto a mantle for its gore and traumatic depictions of violent acts, and it wasn't long before Wedin and Söderström gained a certain reputation within the industry – exacerbated by their interview appearance at Gamescom last year with a whiteboard of forbidden questions. Yet, while the duo has never been shy about its inspirations for the game – the neon-lit hyper-violence of Nicholas Winding Refn's *Drive* and *Kick-Ass*' subversive imagining of the superhero genre – these comparisons were wrongly assumed to be superficial and *Hotline Miami* couldn't escape its association with gratuitous bloodshed.

"A big part of the game is that we didn't want to celebrate violence and just make, like, a cool action game," says Söderström. "We wanted the violence to be really brutal and disgusting and make you question what you were doing when playing the game. I think a lot of people have picked up on that and then there are some that think it's just comical violence. It's not really what we were intending to do with the game."

It's therefore the case that the sequel has a little explaining to do. Not just in demystifying the more opaque nature of its narrative but also in creating a sequel that hits harder than any weapon you may have wielded first time around. »



"WE'RE NOT THINKING SO HARD ABOUT EVERYTHING WE DO. WE JUST HAVE A BEER AND HAVE SOME FUN WHILE WE'RE HERE"

DENNIS WEDIN

Hotline Miami's brutal challenge is part of the growing popularity for hardcore games.

Anyone who has navigated through the pink-carpeted corridors and marched blood into the zebra-print rugs of the original *Hotline Miami* will be familiar with Wedin and Söderström's penchant for Eighties nostalgia. However, the developer's dedication to the style stems further back in the duo's history. Söderström, otherwise known as Cactus, had already established himself as an offbeat Swedish independent with a rapid-fire work rate – releasing forty titles, each with their own esoteric theme.

"I had this idea of making a music videogame for my band, so I asked Jonatan if he wanted to do it for me," Wedin tells us. "He said he'd do it on one condition: that I did all the graphics because he didn't want to make everything himself. So we made that one small game but it was so much fun we kept on doing it." The result is oddly compulsive gaming experience *Keyboard Drumset Fucking Werewolf*. A sort of energetic blast of *WarioWare*-style micro-games as if designed by CKY, with each button-mashing sequence eloquently punctuating the backing track in a ludicrous few minutes of audio-visual carnage.

"After that we started looking through a bunch of unfinished games that Jonatan has made," says Wedin. "We saw *Super Carnage* and I really liked it. I like top-down games, so I thought we should do something with this and expand it."



The duo's love of retro games and Eighties pop culture extends back to their first collaboration.

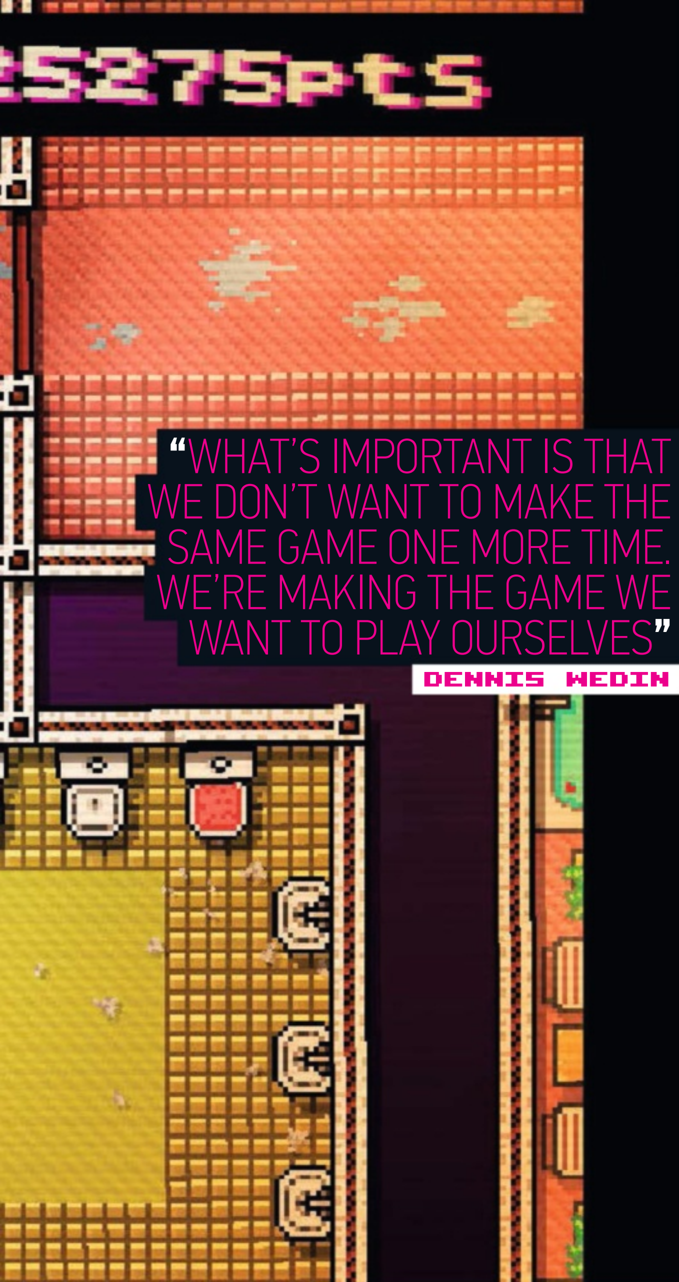


Keyboard Drumset Fucking Werewolf is available to download online. We recommend you do.

This would serve as the crude prototype for what would eventually become *Hotline Miami*. The two worked out of Dennis' apartment (the roles have now reversed with the pair working out of Jonatan's for the sequel) and both reached the rather fortuitous decision to start making some money and Dennaton Games was born. "At first it was supposed to be a game we were going to make in less than a month," reveals Söderström. "I was really running out of money at that point. I just wanted to make a quick game and thought it might sell a little. But as we continued to develop the game it turned out really good so we couldn't wait to improve it and keep expanding." The pressure came once Dennaton entered the crunch phase, Wedin and Söderström working all week "pretty much all day and all night" and by the end, when it was released and bugs began to surface, both found themselves battling stress as well as coding issues.

"Even when it was done, I don't think Dennis or I were thinking that it would make any money or become popular," states Söderström. "I mean, it was super difficult and weird."

"I thought because the story was vague that people might not get it and wouldn't be interested in trying to figure it out by themselves," says a modest Wedin. "That turned out to be false as people became really into that aspect of the game."



"WHAT'S IMPORTANT IS THAT WE DON'T WANT TO MAKE THE SAME GAME ONE MORE TIME. WE'RE MAKING THE GAME WE WANT TO PLAY OURSELVES"
DENNIS WEDIN

While the narrative that underpins *Hotline Miami* is undeniably captivating, pinpointing what makes the kaleidoscopic storyline is tricky. Still, with *Wrong Number,* Wedin and Söderström are continuing the story from Jacket's perspective, who last we saw escaping from hospital and taking down the Russian mafia – that's before the game enters another timeline where Jacket is killed by a character named Biker. And while the sequel will explore some of the original title's more enigmatic elements – for instance, the role of the janitors – that' not to say that it'll be any less opaque. "In the sequel there's going to be a lot more story to the game, a lot more development, still very vague but more of it," reveals Wedin. "What's important is that we don't want to make the same game one more time. We're making the game we want to play ourselves and if people like it then that's awesome, but if they don't then that's fine."

"It's not completely new," adds Söderström. "I mean, most of the gameplay elements are still there but we've added some new variations to it and there will be a lot of similarities to the first game of course. But we're trying to focus on new directions and just making sure that it doesn't feel the same way as the first game in certain aspects. There is a lot of new content that excites us."

MUSIC TO DIE FOR

We present an essential playlist of accompanying killer tunes to play Hotline Miami by

NIGHTCALL
ARTIST **KAVINSKY**



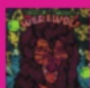
Taken from the soundtrack to Nicolas Winding Refn's *Drive,* it's a song that adds a contemporary edge to the stylings of Eighties electronic pop. While more whimsical than anything in Hotline Miami itself, it was a guiding influence over the title.

HYDROGEN
ARTIST **M.O.O.N**



It's hard to single out just one song from the *Hotline Miami* soundtrack but M.O.O.N's *Hydrogen* doesn't just replicate that evocative Eighties vibe but ups the tempo considerably to make it the perfect backing track to the slaughter.

KEYBOARD DRUMSET FUCKING WEREWOLF
ARTIST **FUCKING WEREWOLF ASSO**



In utilising a track from *Hotline* co-creator Dennis Wedin's own band as the basis for a video-game, Wedin and Jonatan Söderström created a relationship between sound and interaction.

ROLLER MOBSTER
ARTIST **CARPENTER BRUT**



The duo revealed that they have been inundated with requests and recommendations from artists and fans. One suggestion is Carpenter Brut with his track *Roller Mobster,* which sounds like it could be straight out of a John Carpenter flick.





There's also another feature that the duo is more than keen to talk about. Multiple playable characters, each offering their own unique style and handling that'll create some variation in how players approach each new labyrinth death maze. While it was challenging enough to grow accustomed to Jacket's suite of attacks and rhythm, acclimating to a variety of new weapon-wielding weirdos will add an interesting difficulty curve to the gameplay beyond a few aesthetical design tweaks.

"We just want to expand on the universe," says Wedin. "It was kind of being inspired by the first game and what characters could be involved after the events of the first game, but also before all that occurred." If anything, it appears to be a safe move for the Scandinavian developer just establishing a foothold in the industry – a prospect that contradicts the duo's bohemian reputation. However, they refute that the intention was to just simply cash-in on the original's mass recognition and commercial profit. "We didn't want to do that," explains Söderström, also detailing why *Wrong Number* will be the concluding chapter in the *Hotline Miami* series. "We don't want to just make sequels. We have plans to make a certain number of games in our lives and it would be kind of boring to make the same kind of game over and over."

"We don't want to be the guys that *just* make *Hotline Miami,*" agree Wedin. "We have a lot of ideas of where we want to go after this." Attempting to draw more information about ideas the two plan on exploring in the future only proves that both keep their ambitions graciously in check. There are no intentions to expand the team, neither are there any plans to stretch beyond two dimensions for the time being – although, Söderström admits that if they do decide to venture into 3D games it might necessitate a personnel expansion.

"For me it's not being a developer that only cares about money; our priority is making games," says Söderström. "I want to make games because I enjoy being creative and putting my thoughts and feeling and experiences into a game. That's more important than making something that's popular." It's this idea of establishing a legacy based on integrity and creative versatility that Wedin agrees is the driving force behind the studio's work: "It would be cool to have that when someone saw our brand mark it stands for quality: 'They make cool games. Even if I don't know what this particular game is about, it's made by them so it's probably cool.' Like when Konami and Capcom were always doing cool games, or Bitmap Brothers."

But it's clear that the studio's sudden rise to prominence and the continued popularity of *Hotline Miami* two years on is still overwhelming for both Wedin and Söderström. Both speak of their work with a youthful exuberance but become quietly modest when confronted about its esteem and oddly withdrawn when discussing the specifics of the studio's development process. From the minds behind one of the most outrageous, kinetic and captivating indie games of recent years, the edgy reputation doesn't appear to match up to the truth. "All this stuff is just us, well, just *doing,*" says Wedin. "We're not thinking so hard about everything we do. We just have a beer and have some fun while we're here." And the infamous Gamescom whiteboard? "It wasn't really planned to be edgy or all over the internet. I just had a few beers, a whiteboard and a marker."

We ask if that's how most of Dennaton's ideas begin, to which Wedin responds with a coy chuckle. " Maybe…"















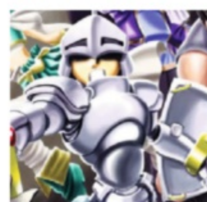



KILLER APPS






WHILE WE AWAIT THE GAMES THAT WILL DEFINE THE SUCCESS OF THE NEWEST GENERATION OF GAMES MACHINES, **GAMES™** LOOKS BACK THROUGH THE YEARS AT THE TITLES THAT HAVE DEFINED THEIR HOST HARDWARE















SPACE INVADERS Atari VCS

Released: **January 1980** Developer: **Atari**



■ ALTHOUGH INITIAL sales of Atari's second home console had been sluggish - selling around 800,000 in its first two years - by the time *Space Invaders* was squeezed into cartridge form the machine's fortunes had begun to pick up as competitors left the field. As with many coin-op conversions (many of which were blatant copies) Atari's licensed edition of the Taito phenomenon didn't much look like its arcade forebear, with overly-chunky sprites and only a mid-range squelch in place of the original's iconic and ominous bass tones, yet the game launched the VCS into profitability, doubling hardware sales and helping to bring in $2bn in revenue in 1980. Moreover it locked Atari into a strategy of pursuing as many franchise exclusives as possible, culminating in the capture and first console release of *Pac-Man* in 1982 - the system's biggest-selling game.

ATIC ATAC

ZX Spectrum

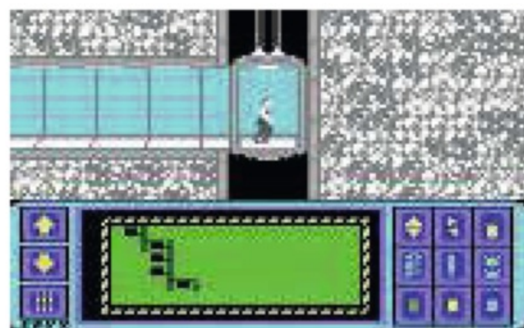
Released: **1983**

Developer: **Ultimate Play The Game**



While *Jet Pac* was the Stamper brothers' first release, a *Defender*-inspired collect 'em up that tempted many to pick up the cheaper 16K model Spectrum, it was the top-down survival horror of *Atic Atac*, marketed in full-colour magazine ads, that convinced prospective buyers that the 48K model was the machine of the future, especially given that the price had just been slashed to £125.



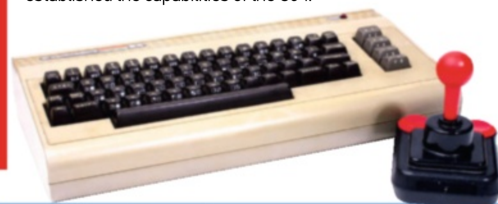


IMPOSSIBLE MISSION Commodore 64

Released: **1983** Developer: **Dennis Caswell**



■ While the Commodore 64 quickly became the dominant 8-bit home computer across North America in the early Eighties, supplanting Atari's ageing 400/800 series, it had a harder time convincing Europeans of its qualities in spite of its more robust exterior. To some degree, *Impossible Mission* helped change perceptions, for not only did it offer smooth and colourful graphics, it provided intelligible digitised speech for the first time in any home computer game. While the 1985 Spectrum version ended up a capable conversion, *Impossible Mission* was one of a number of games - followed by the likes of *International Karate* and *The Last Ninja* - that established the capabilities of the C64.





ELITE BBC Micro

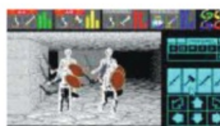
Released: **September 1984**

Developer: **Ian Bell & David Braben**





■ In spite of offering the finest arcade clones of any home machine, the hefty BBC Microcomputer, first launched in December 1981, suffered from an image problem on account of it being aligned with an overbearing establishment, unlike the cheap and informal Spectrum. All that changed in 1984 when one of the most expansive and ambitious games anyone had ever seen turned the Beeb overnight into a machine everyone wanted to play on, introducing gaming's first 3D open world and offering months of play. Unfortunately, because the BBC Micro remained beyond the pockets of most parents, sneaking in a few minutes during computer science lessons was the best most could hope for, at least until the game was ported to the other home computers a year later.



DUNGEON MASTER Atari ST

Released: **1987**

Developer: **FTL Games**



■ The Atari ST was intended to compete with more serious computers, like the Apple Macintosh, so it's perhaps unsurprising that it took a few years to become established as a serious games machine. Building upon the classic dungeon crawl template set by *Ultima* and *Wizardry*, FTL's classic helped esablish a distinct western lineage distinct from the JRPGs that were arriving on consoles, remaining the most successful game on the platform.





SUPER MARIO BROS. NES

Released: **September 1985** Developer: **Nintendo**



■ It's hard to overstate the importance of the NES in reviving a depressed console market in the mid-Eighties, just as it's almost impossible to get across how integral to that revitalisation the release of *Super Mario Bros.* was. With a cast of charming and colourful characters, bright, side-scrolling levels and pixel-perfect gameplay, it's a game that attracted a new generation into gaming, establishing Nintendo as the premier power in the industry for years to come. Whether or not *Super Mario Bros.* single-handedly saved the videogame industry, as some have suggested, the fact that it sold 40m copies and remains among the top three on most people's best ever lists probably helps its case.





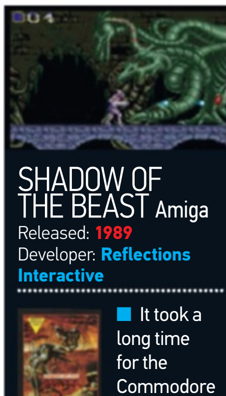
METAL GEAR MSX2

Released: **July 1987** Developer: **Hideo Kojima / Konami**



While Commodore and Atari battled it out in the US, and Sinclair, Acorn and Commodore fought for European market share, across most of the rest of the world, the MSX was quietly becoming the dominant home computer format, providing a platform for Japanese developers to establish themselves before dominating the Nineties. Chief among this new breed of game designers was Hideo Kojima who, tasked with taking over the development of a military action game, decided the hardware was unsuitable and instead developed what would become one of the first stealth action games, enhancing the reputation of the MSX format and establishing one of gaming's most enduring franchises.





SHADOW OF THE BEAST Amiga

Released: **1989**
Developer: **Reflections Interactive**



It took a long time for the Commodore Amiga to establish itself as the 16-bit home computer of choice, due to a lot of its games being ported over from the Atari ST. It was only when a game appeared on the Amiga first, that the difference between the two machines became obvious, as was the case with the action of the slick *Shadow Of The Beast*.



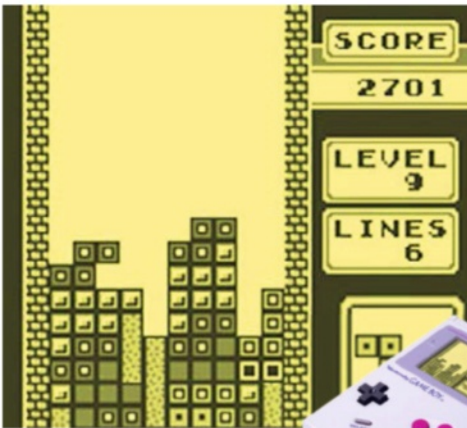


WING COMMANDER PC

Released: **September 1990** Developer: **Origin Systems**



Given that the IBM-compatible PC has been with us for 33 years and the 'personal computer' even longer, we could probably devote an entire feature to the killer games that have ensured the PC's survival as a games machine, with the likes of *Doom*, *The Sims*, *Half-Life 2* and *World Of Warcraft* all defining various ages of PC game development. *Wing Commander* stands out from the crowd though, for even though PC games in 1990 accounted for a reported 60% of computer game sales (compared to the Amiga's 10%) the PC was still perceived to be an expensive monster, providing far less gaming bang-per-buck than either the Amiga or ST. It was the gradual uptake of VGA graphics and dedicated soundcards that changed the perception, both technologies that *Wing Commander* took full advantage of, helping to shift thousands of Soundblaster cards and transforming an unattractive beige box into gaming's most enduring platform.





TETRIS Game Boy

Released: **June 1989**
Developer: **Bullet-Proof Software / Nintendo**



As underpowered as its hardware often seems to be ahead of release, Nintendo has frequently found a way to make it a success, often by throwing in a free game to sweeten the deal. As it had done with *Super Mario Bros.* for the US launch of the Nintendo Entertainment System in 1985, so Nintendo bundled copies of *Tetris* in with the Game Boy in the hope of hurting the subsequent launch of Atari's powerful Lynx and Sega's Game Gear handheld. With all 1m US Game Boys shifted in a matter of weeks and 35m copies of *Tetris* eventually sold throughout the system's lifetime, it's fair to say the strategy worked a treat.

SUPER MARIO WORLD SNES

Released: **November 1990**
Developer: **Nintendo**



By the time that Nintendo set to work marketing its powerful new 16-bit console to replace the NES, the formula for a successful launch had largely been perfected in the Eighties. Once again, a game was to be bundled in with the machine, replacing *Tetris*' cast of tetrominos with Nintendo's most established and iconic character – aided for the first time by a certain Yoshi the dinosaur. *Super Mario World* eventually went on to sell more than 20m copies, by far the most successful SNES title.









SONIC THE HEDGEHOG Mega Drive

Released: **June 1991** Developer: **Sonic Team**



Having enjoyed some success with the Master System in the mid-to-late Eighties, Sega went out to tackle Nintendo head on with its next console the Mega Drive. To stand a chance in the marketing war, a new mascot was needed. Step forward Mr. Needlemouse, later rechristened Sonic the Hedgehog. The release of Sonic's first platform adventure had a huge impact on the videogame market, driving the early success of Sega's new hardware and giving gamers an easy to relate to mascot in the hyperactive, exciting Sonic.



ALIEN VS PREDATOR Jaguar

Released: **October 1994** Developer: **Rebellion**



■ There weren't many reasons to invest in Atari's final bid at world console domination, in spite of claims of superior processing power. The TV remote-style controller was considered to be poor, while games were few and far between. There were however a handful of titles that did help to shift the 125,000 consoles that were eventually sold between 1993 and 1995, the most accomplished being *Aliens Vs Predator*, a first-person shooter that took the popular *Doom* template and applied the then-unsullied *AVP* franchise to it. Unfortunately, the game was delayed a number of times, coming far too late to save the Jaguar from oblivion, although it did establish long before the release of *GoldenEye* on the N64 that original first-person shooters had a very bright future on consoles.

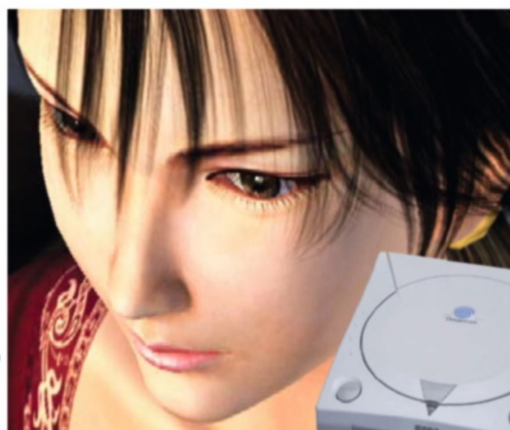
SUPER MARIO 64 Nintendo 64

Released: **June 1996** Developer: **Nintendo**



■ *Super Mario 64* was the game that convinced developers that a 2D series could make a smooth and successful transition to 3D. Retaining the challenge of earlier games, *Mario 64* didn't just add a new dimension for Nintendo's mascot to jump across, the hub-based levels allowed players to explore and exhaust the new landscape, returning to discover new secrets. *Super Mario 64* was, just like its SNES launch predecessor, the biggest-selling game for its host system, although with a reported 11m total sales it sold considerably less than *Super Mario World*, ostensibly due to intense competition from Sony's PlayStation and its vast library of third-party titles.





SHENMUE Dreamcast

Released: **December 1999**
Developer: **Sega**



■ While it was launch title *Sonic Adventure* that became the Dreamcast's best-selling game, it was the much-delayed *Shenmue* that was the must-have game for Sega's hardware adieu, offering upon its release one of the most extensive and detailed open worlds a console had yet seen. Responsible for introducing the now much-maligned quick-time event, Yu Suzuki's adventure masterpiece was an ambitious and expensively produced white elephant. It's been estimated that Dreamcast owners would have had to buy the game twice for it to have made a profit. In those terms it probably contributed more to the system's demise than to its success, but it shows how important the game was that the series is cited by gamers as one they'd most like to see completed.

SNAKE

Nokia 6110
Released: **1997**
Developer: **Taneli Armanto**

■ The oldest game here (old enough to be considered antiquated when a version of it featured among the launch titles for the Atari VCS in 1977), a new version of *Snake* made its mark when it was programmed as a cursory feature for the Nokia 6110 mobile phone and its successors, causing a number of commuters to miss their stops on the way to work. Curiously it wasn't the first mobile game; that honour belongs to a version of *Tetris* on the Hagenuk MT-2000 in 1994, but it was *Snake* that changed perceptions as to where mobile gaming might go.



POKÉMON GOLD / SILVER Game Boy Color

Released: **November 1999** Developer: **Game Freak**



■ As important as the first gen of *Pokémon* games were to the success of the Game Boy, by the time the *Gold* and *Silver* Editions appeared for the year-old Game Boy Color, *Pokémon* had become a gaming cultural phenomenon on a level not seen for years, supplemented by the schoolyard takeover of the card game. Continuing the familiar blend of monster exploitation and turn-based RPG combat established in the Game Boy originals, with just enough added colour to ensure 23m million people bought copies, the series has continued to be a handheld best-seller on Nintendo hardware ever since



FINAL FANTASY VII PlayStation

Released: **January 1997** Developer: **Square**



■ While the original PlayStation offered a number of successful first-party games, it was the third-party titles that ensured the success of the console, none more so than the latest in a series that had been a stalwart of Nintendo's machines. Originally destined for the SNES, due to the storage limitations of the Nintendo 64 Square decided that Sony's CD-ROM-based PlayStation would be the better format to accommodate the game's extensive full-motion sequences.



GRAND THEFT AUTO 3 PlayStation 2

Released: **October 2001** Developer: **DMA Design**



■ For many years *Grand Theft Auto* was synonymous with PlayStation hardware, but it wasn't until the release of the first full-3D game that the series more directly contributed to Sony's success, appearing on PS2 two full years before rival Xbox users were allowed to indulge their darker fantasies on the streets of Liberty City. Likewise both *Vice City* and *San Andreas* were released first for Sony's machine and all together the three games sold more than 37m copies.





HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED Xbox

Released: **November 2001** Developer: **Bungie**



■ When Microsoft starting shopping around for an FPS to help ensure the fortunes of its entry into the console market it didn't have to look very far. Bungie's *Halo* had been impressing in behind-door previews since it was unveiled for PC in 1999, and while it had to be significantly altered from its third-person open-world design, it didn't disappoint upon its eventual release. For the first time in videogame history a shooter had been devised that was the equal of anything on PC and with more than 50% of Xbox buyers picking up a copy and five million copies sold in its first fours years, Microsoft could not only claim the Xbox a success, but boast an exclusive new FPS franchise that Sony would struggle to match.

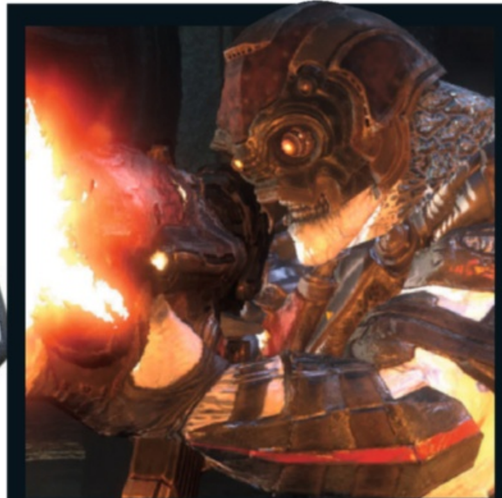




POCKET KINGDOM: OWN THE WORLD N-Gage

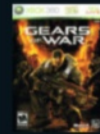
Released: **November 2004**
Developer: **Sega**

■ Nokia's gaming phone was forgettable, the most obvious reason being it lacked precise controls and looked ridiculous when used as a phone. But released in the same month as *World Of Warcraft*, *Pocket Kingdom* was a near full-on MMO, one that took a sly look at online gaming culture. It was a game that delighted in breaking down the fourth wall.



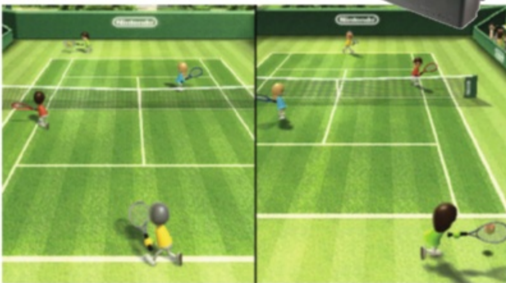
GEARS OF WAR Xbox 360

Released: **November 2006**
Developer: **Epic Games**



■ Big, loud and dumb it may have been but Epic's gory bro-shooter was almost as vital to the early success of the Xbox 360 as *Halo* had been to its predecessor. Selling a healthy five million copies, not only was the game an evolved and frenetic cover-based action title boasting one of the finest co-op campaigns ever experienced, it introduced 360 gamers to the third iteration of Epic's Unreal graphics technology, an engine that is still powering games eight years on - three *Gears Of War* sequels among them.





WII SPORTS Wii

Released: **November 2006** Developer: **Nintendo**



■ The Wii's pack-in game may not have seemed like an overly-ambitious title, offering as it did a smattering of simplified sports mini-games, yet more than any game before or since, it succeeded in reaching out to such a wide audience that it not only ensured the success of a unique console that had been much-maligned up until it's release, but would go on to become the best-selling game of all time.



NINTENDOGS Nintendo DS

Released: **August 2005**
Developer: **Nintendo**



■ With *Nintendogs* and the *Brain Training* series both among the DS's very best-selling games, Nintendo succeeded in attracting the mature and the young, with the stylus and in-built microphone offering an intuitive means of interacting with games. In resurrecting the Nineties Tamagochi concept, Nintendo's virtual pet series became an instant hit with 24m copies sold.





THE LAST OF US PlayStation 3

Released: **June 2013** Developer: **Naughty Dog**



■ After years of snapping at Xbox 360's heels in terms of hardware sales and sharing the spoils over successive releases of *GTA* and *Call Of Duty*, PlayStation 3 eventually drew level, partly thanks to a late rush of well received exclusives such as *Uncharted* and *God Of War*. The best of the Sony lot, however, was *The Last Of Us*, Naughty Dog's gripping zombie thriller, a game that might not have sold a great many PS3s, but reasserted Sony's position in the minds of gamers at just the right time to get excited by a new generation of console hardware.



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Reviews



98

Thief

We stalk the streets of Eidos Montreal's stealth reboot



THE AVERAGE

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THERE'S A TRANSPARENT ILLUSION OF FREEDOM AT WORK THAT LACKS A CAREFUL DESIGN TO FULLY CONVINCE

THE HAUNTED HOUSE

The Cradle is one of the most memorable moments from any *Thief* game (or any game, period) for good reason. It takes the fundamental mechanics and twists them into a chilling and tense scenario built on effective horror tropes. One of the 2014 *Thief* reboot's strongest chapters is a similarly atmospheric level set within an abandoned insane asylum. It's an inventive and evocative subversion based on what has come before, packed with unsettling imagery, haunting soundtrack and some genuine scares. If only the whole game found similar inspiration to break away from its routine and do something different then it'd have made for a much more interesting and involving experience overall.





REACH EXCEEDING ITS GRASP

Thief

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Eidos Montreal
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Dual core GPU, 4GB RAM, Radeon 4800 / Nvidia GTS 250 GPU, 20GB HD
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Left: Garrett's home is The City's imposing clock tower. For the most wanted man, he has chosen what is quite possibly the most obvious hiding place in the history of hiding places. At least it looks cool, though.

We're surprised to find that the very first action committed in Eidos Montreal's *Thief* reboot is the felonious act of larceny itself. Frankly, we expected an opening with a few more frills attached. Why else would the title have suffered the ignominy of a protracted development period if not to reinvigorate the franchise with all the trimmings that have come to define the modern action-adventure game? Where are the guns? The explosive setpieces? What about the awkwardly incongruous boss battles?

What few of these systems appear present in the final design are restrained: free-running that seemingly snags on every jutting plank, a 'Focus' mode that reveals the secrets of your surroundings and the so-hot-right-now bow clasped inside the brooding protagonist's left fist. From a superficial perspective it at least looks the part. But purists will be pleased to hear that such popular mechanics have been pushed into the background in favour of its lineage's staunch stealth approach; everyone else will lament a reboot clinging too closely to the antiquated ideals of its origin.

Set in the putrefying streets of The City, returning not-quite-a-gaming icon Garrett abruptly awakens a year after a tragic incident endowed with a suite of supernatural powers thanks to an ethereal force known as The Primal. Determined to discover the truth behind the calamitous event Garrett must delve deeper into the lives of the native aristocracy who hold the answers he seeks – a convenient trail that has plenty of loot to be plundered en route.

This makes Garrett the worst kind of conflicted anti-hero. Perennially haunted by visions of his past and doggedly in pursuit of the men behind his treachery, the urgency to resolve his internal struggle is undermined by his willingness to half-inch every gleaming artefact within the vicinity, not to mention his unwavering, almost pacifistic moral code.

It's less of a problem for those that eagerly anticipated a return to hardline stealth gameplay as much as it is for people who have grown to appreciate delicately crafted narratives and deft characterisation. *Thief* is a title featuring a story destined to be off-handily dismissed as being 'gamey'; the worse kind of convoluted and self-important drivel that at best is bearable and at worst draws attention away from its merits. Furthermore, it struggles to make its narrative feel even remotely tangible. The City itself is a lifeless husk, scarcely populated – its residences almost always completely vacant – a problem compounded by the fact that there's barely a notable landmark outside of the clock tower to differentiate each district from one another.

We're told that there's a plague-like disease known as 'The Gloom' affecting the population in the background of a political upheaval primed to spark a civil rebellion. We witness a hanging, hear the murmurings of a few locals, but you rarely get the sense that this is a world descending into ruin. You rarely get the sense that this is a world at all.

It's perhaps telling that Eidos Montreal held back so often from declaring *Thief* an open-world game. The City is a hub, one that is awkwardly divided into several areas that can be reached (and then loaded) by various means. While not a hugely sprawling setting, it's big enough to become disorientating and the lack of an accessible waypoint system is a frustration when you're trying to track down the shopkeeper to restock supplies.

Unsurprisingly, this is a bit of an issue when the process of upgrading and replenishing your arsenal is the fundamental purpose of pilfering items for cash value. Even stranger is that this progression system hinges so

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

PULL FOCUS: Focus is one of the fundamental enhancements over the original Thief games. Here it highlights objects of interest and interactive scenery to better find your way around the environment.



Above: Using focus will highlight paths that Garrett needs to use to navigate his way through certain levels. It's an underutilised feature, only really useful for quickly identifying items that can be stolen.



Left: There are a bunch of different arrow heads, with only two designed directly for combat. We found water arrows to be the most effective – used to extinguish flames and darken pathways.

CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW 2

BETTER THAN



WORSE THAN

DISHONORED

much on combat enhancements when the game hostilely discourages this approach to gameplay. You have an attack button (swinging the non-lethal Blackjack) but it's ineffective outside of straight one-on-one brawls and you're limited supply of arrows makes it impossible to neutralise threats from afar without alerting other guards on watch. Without the notion of combat as a feasible alternative to stealth, it soon begins to pull apart *Thief*'s central conceit.

There's a transparent illusion of freedom at work that lacks a careful design to fully convince. While this is fairly obvious and somewhat forgivable in the layout of The City hub – the parkour-style free running is disappointingly and often fatally limited to very specific pathways – the lack of autonomy in the missions themselves is less excusable.

Most of the eight chapters start the same. You're placed somewhere along the boundaries of an estate with a dishonourable goal to trespass and pinch a specific item. A few routes are available at this juncture, but the true path feels linear – the rest just detours for more plundering, or to provide a distraction to patrolling guards.

The best example is during the ransacking of a brothel, eavesdropping on a conversation revealed that the nearby opium supplies could be tampered with and therefore cause mass syncopy. It worked too, furtively exploring the surroundings for a vent that lead through to the control panel that, with a snip from Garrett's wire cutters, causes the opium to permeate and poison the entire establishment (except for Garrett, for some reason). But this is a rare glimpse into a more emergent and ambitious experience that *Thief* fails to fully commit itself to. It's a problem that it seems more preoccupied in disciplining players into the 'correct' way to play *Thief* rather than adapting to an individual's playstyle,

A BRILLIANTLY TENSE, GRATIFYING EXPERIENCE THAT EIDOS MONTREAL STRUGGLES TO SUSTAIN OVER THE EIGHT HOURS OF GAMEPLAY

FAQs

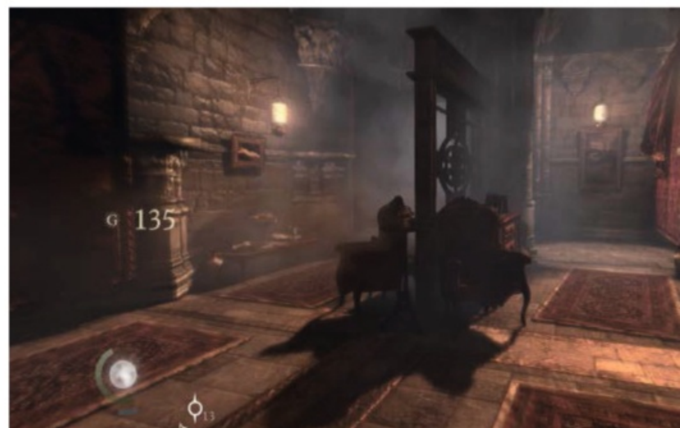
Q. IS IT OPEN WORLD?
No, not really. The City hub is fairly open, but the game loads between its fairly small districts and the layout is confusing.

Q. BETTER THAN THE ORIGINAL?
If you're a fan of the original *Thief* games then you'll find much to like. But don't expect any massive deviations from the formula.

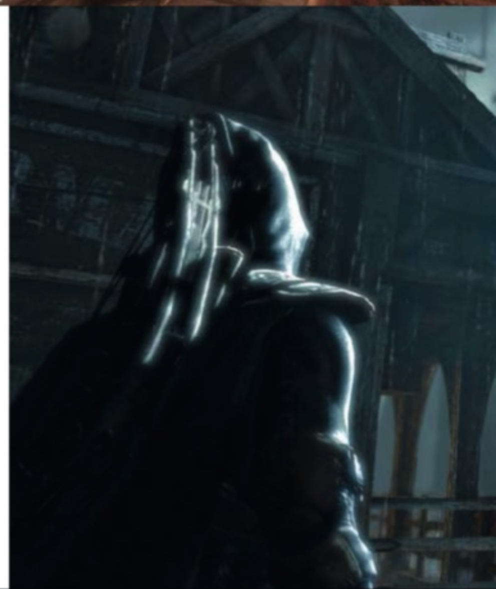
Q. HOW'S THE ACTING?
The voice actor behind Garrett does his best growl, but the nonsense storyline doesn't leave him with a lot to work with.



Right: There are a couple of villains in *Thief*, but the slimy Thief-catcher General is the primary antagonist. Interestingly, you can choose whether to fight him or run away during the game's penultimate boss battle.







Left: There are a few items you can buy that'll help your criminal deeds. The most useful of which you'll want to buy as quickly impossible, including a wrench (used to unscrew vents and steal plaques), scalpel (used to extract paintings from their frames) and wire cutters (to disable traps).

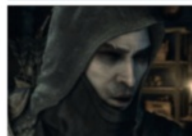
Below: You can pay Basso a visit at any time and accept a series of side missions to steal valuable goods from locations across The City. There's understandably not much variation to be found at the core of these missions, though.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

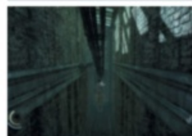
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

1 MIN



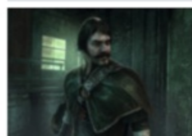
You're in a house next to a sleeping man and you've just been raiding his underwear drawer for a gold spoon. Congratulations – you've stolen your first item. Now get the hell out of there.

1 HOUR



You're in some sort of human corpse meat-packing factory and it's your first opportunity to strike your own path around the world. Except there are about two doors and only one way out.

7 HOURS



Was that a boss battle? It sure looked like it. Well, that was weird, slightly unnecessary and poorly designed. Hopefully there's not another o-oh, crap, here comes another. Ah. We see where this is going.



A BIT ON THE SIDE

While there are about eight hours worth of gameplay found in the main set of quests, there are some side missions available from a couple of the main supporting characters in the game. It's disappointing that these don't take any particularly meaningful form. You're given a list of items that someone wants stolen and you follow the map (again, lack of waypoint system and awkwardly structured divisions being an issue) to the location where you'll just break in and pinch them. There's a few interesting story elements here but the majority of the time it's a simple job that'll take a couple of minutes and barely worth the effort – especially when currency is relatively useless once the main game has been completed.



or even widening its design document to encompass more variation and diversity in how to approach each new chapter. After the likes of *Dishonored* and even *Hitman Absolution* demonstrated to varying degrees of success a balancing act between stealth and action in a malleable game world, *Thief* defiantly shucks progressiveness in favour of a wiry reinterpretation of the original trilogy's achievements.

At least in that regard *Thief* excels. The mechanics that serve as the basis for Garrett's stealth antics have been given due attention and you soon learn that speed, sound and touch each contribute to whether or not you can successfully evade detection in each mission. With what is in truth a limited array of abilities at your disposal, stealth is a case of sticking to the shadows, creeping along corridors and studying the surroundings for opportunities to slowly progress. With so few systems at play, it doesn't take long to get to grips with the essence of *Thief* and there's certainly a compulsiveness to searching every last linen closet and bedside table for misplaced trinkets to add to your expanding gold reserve.

More tempting is the stash of collectable items located in both The City itself and concealed behind revolving bookcases and veiled safes – often part of a more elaborate puzzle to solve. Much like Eidos Montreal's *Deus Ex* reboot, many of the more interesting story elements come from incidental notes left around the environment and these serve to both flesh out supporting characters as well as scatter breadcrumbs towards a greater prize usually hidden behind a revolving bookcase or beneath an ornate painting. And there's certainly a greater satisfaction in discovering a shopkeeper has been hawking fake jewellery out his shop window while storing away the real deal in a concealed safe downstairs.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

OPEN UP: The level design is too linear to ever feel like you have any choice over which route to take. A more open approach to environments with multiple pathways would've made the game feel more unique.

And that almost encompasses why *Thief* is at its best when it's doing exactly what it says on the tin. It can't hide the repetitiveness of its template but in the simple act of silently snooping and investigating every corner of the world, while circumventing every enemy, there's a brilliantly tense, gratifying experience that Eidos Montreal sadly struggles to sustain over the eight hours of gameplay – resorting to cheap enemy types and crushing linearity.

A success then for fans of a game made a decade ago, but *Thief*'s reach exceeds its grasp by some margin and an opportunity to revive a beloved property with renewed relevance has been sorely missed. If it had a few more ideas (or even stolen a few) then this could've been less of an uninspired remake and something truly worth getting your hands on.

VERDICT 6/10
A SOLID STEALTH GAME WITH A LACK OF SCOPE

MERCURYSTEAM'S SECOND STAB AT OWNING THE ACTION ADVENTURE WHIPS UP THE WRONG KIND OF FRENZY

Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 2

As the next generation becomes current and memories of old consoles begin to fade, each passing release on older tech takes on more significance and stature. Once ultra-expensive assets are now relatively cheap, meaning developers can push the old boxes to their extremes, creating experiences that are longer, stronger, more expansive and ambitious than a lot of what came before. *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 2* is definitely one of these games. It's a true epic; an enormous action adventure that pulls in multiple genre tropes, myriad enemy designs and a huge number of locations to create something that, on the surface at least, feels very big and important. The music, menus and gorgeous architecture suggest there's greatness to be found in *Lords Of Shadow 2*. Unfortunately, there's a also a lot else.

Expanding on 2010's *Lords Of Shadow*, this sequel now tells the story of Dracula (formerly Gabriel) as he is awakened from a vampiric coma and thrust into life in a modern day city. What seems like an interesting narrative conceit soon becomes flimsy window dressing, though, an excuse to include boxy 'science' corridors to bulk up the game's length in between the altogether more appealing and appropriate castle rambling. Ostensibly, the game takes place in two timelines; two dimensions, effectively, with Dracula bounding between an ethereal past/alternate reality while also plodding around the current day, searching for a way to restore his powers. There's an overarching story about an evil corporation that's in league with Satan, but all of it is largely incomprehensible, leaping from character to character and location to location like some discarded half-finished Kojima script. That stuff rarely matters anyway, although *Lords Of Shadow 2* is absurdly self-important at times. It indulges itself in lengthy cutscenes where characters talk nonsense. What does matter is how the thing plays. And here it's deeply inconsistent.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

TRIPLE THREAT: The three-weaponed system gives this sequel's combat more depth, although its implementation is far from perfect.

Despite some protestations from its creators suggesting a commonality with the peerless *Zelda* series, this is an action game in the *God Of War* mould, with aggressive combat, pre-routed climbing and a few puzzles. At first, this feels rather lovely, with an opening sequence that could have come straight from Sony Santa Monica itself. Still, you battle enemies to get the hang of the familiar controls, then jump outside for an almighty scrap with a giant monster that throws in climbing, amazing camera work and quick-fire fighting for a setpiece that really sets the bar high and suggests MercurySteam might just have elevated itself to the upper tiers of action development. Then everything changes.

Obviously there is no way the game could keep up that level of intensity, but after a seemingly neverending cutscene, you're thrust into the first of *Lords Of Shadow 2*'s many stealth sections. Here Dracula is rendered impotent and must figure out pre-

STEALTH IN AN ACTION GAME IS RARELY A GOOD IDEA; AND HERE IT'S AS HAM-FISTED AND MISGUIDED AS IT GETS

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: Spain
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: MercurySteam
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: 28 February
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Below: *Lords Of Shadow 2* doesn't do much to justify the *Castlevania* name beyond its impressive architecture. Backtracking is possible and encouraged, but the game isn't structured like its classic forebears.



Above: The story's almost impossible to follow as it leaps between dimensions, characters and locations.

Left:: In many ways, *Lords Of Shadow 2* is inferior to its predecessor. Yes, the frame-rate is better, the fundamentals of the combat stronger and the visuals far prettier, but the stealth sections and ludicrously frustrating boss fights do it no favours.



TOMB RAIDER

There are an immeasurable number of odd collectibles in *Lords Of Shadow 2*, most of which have little to do with gameplay. You're regularly assaulted with boorish text about your latest artwork unlock in the middle of the screen – often obscuring combat – and every exploratory jaunt around the environment leads you to another weird contraption that gives you yet another piece of tat. At least the shards that allow you to upgrade your health and weapon powers are worth looking for. Maddeningly, too, your inventory doesn't explain what each item does without a further button press, making even basic comprehension as arduous as anything else in the game.

Left: Dracula, or Gabriel, depending on what you want to call him, enjoys biting necks and activating ten-second unskippable animations.

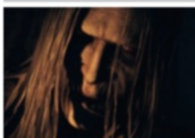


TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS



THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



A triumphant start against an enormous boss, followed by a seemingly endless cutscene rambling on about nothing in particular. A bit of a comedown to say the least.

4 HOURS



You'll probably have regained your powers and the game begins to crank up the difficulty. You'll notice now that this is a game that enjoys making you suffer in various unpleasant ways.

15 HOURS



The end is in sight, and it's been a struggle, albeit one with moments of real quality. There's a strong argument for cutting a few hours of fluff and leaving a much more consistent and enjoyable game.

scripted solutions to stealth puzzles, all of which are unanimously awful. Stealth in an action game is rarely a good idea; and here it's as ham-fisted and misguided as it gets. Sneaking past giant baddies that look like *Gears Of War* rejects in knock-off *Dark Souls* armour, turning into a rat to crawl through a hole, possessing guards to open doors… it's all been done before, done better, and done in games where it makes sense.

Lords Of Shadow 2 constantly falls back on bad ideas and regularly murders its own momentum. When it pits you against a room of enemies and gives you the tools to dispatch them, it's a fine game. Combat is slick if very familiar, with Dracula's whip aping Kratos' Blades Of Chaos in their medium-distance whirling hacks and slashes while enemies time their attacks with obvious and necessary tells. Tying together combos, dodging enemy attacks and chomping on fallen foes' exposed carotids is perfectly enjoyable. Dracula feels aggressive and lithe, and there's a tangible snap to his attacks.

On top of this, our hero (antihero? Bad guy?) has a pair of alternative weapons that alter the play in significant ways. The Void Sword, accessible on L1 (or the left bumper) is a heavier, shorter instrument, but one that lets you suck the life of enemies and claim it as your own. The Chaos Claws, found on R1, are similar to *God Of War*'s gauntlets, letting you smash through enemy armour and specific pieces of scenery. When the combat is allowed to flow, it's certainly engaging, although the parrying system (again, a lift from *God Of War*) is a little sticky as the transitions from attack animation to parry are slower than you might expect.

Yet *Lords Of Shadow 2* often forces you into boss fights that require one of your two alternate weapons, which have to be powered up in a highly irritating manner. The Void Sword and Chaos Claws require orbs –

GOING HAM

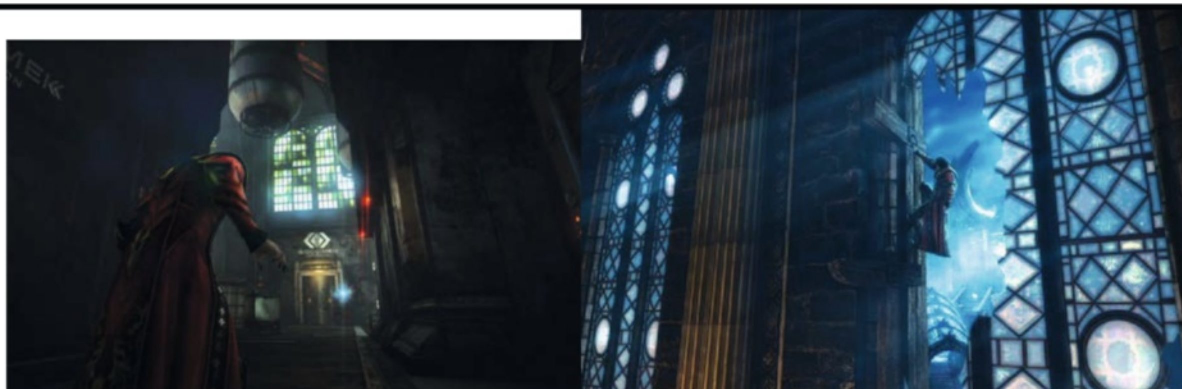
The game's Hollywood cast has been well publicised, as it was with the original *Lords Of Shadow*, but they're not given a huge amount to work with. Patrick Stewart sounds largely confused by his character (who happens to look like a child's drawing of Sean Connery, adding to the oddness) while Robert Carlyle sounds like he just got out of bed when coughing out Dracula's limp one-liners. The worst, though, is from the bosses, who trot out two or three lines of dialogue repeatedly until they're burned into your cerebellum, never to be unheard. Why audio designers do this we'll never understand, but MercurySteam could probably tell you the answer. Over, and over, and over again.

Below: Visually the game is often stunning, pushing current-gen technology to its limits. The gothic architecture is shown off with an artist's camera lens. Some would cry foul that this isn't a PS4 and Xbox One game, but its visuals suggest it doesn't need to be.



Left: Plenty of lording about in the shadows, but not nearly enough *Castlevania* to justify the name.

Right: A curious little character called Chupacabras opens a shop early on in proceedings after you free him from a prison. It's a strange store, as nothing you can buy there feels remotely essential, or often even that useful.





nothing new there – but you can only collect orbs by stringing together a long chain of attacks without being hit. Try doing that when a boss is spamming you with projectiles or an off-screen enemy launches at you with an unblockable attack. This isn't difficulty by design, it's just awkwardness.

And back to those stealth sections again, because they really are poor. They break so many unwritten rules. Instant failure is bad enough, but being sent back to a prior section every time you fail is just miserable. There's no room for trial and error or experimentation, you just have to figure out the solution and laboriously trudge through it. And if you make a mistake, it's all the way back to the start.

All of this is doubly frustrating because there are times when *Lords Of Shadow 2* doesn't just play well, it soars along. An elongated battle atop, inside and along the outside of a moving train wouldn't feel out of place in *Uncharted*, for example, with its dynamic camera angles, criss-crossing gameplay styles and relentless scrap with a fearsome enemy. Or the battle with Medusa; a flawed gem, perhaps, given its reliance on those aforementioned orbs, but a masterclass in artistic enemy design. She looks terrifying and imposing, and felling her is undoubtedly satisfying.

Above: The voice cast is impressive, but the script is not. Compared to the relative unknowns in games like *The Last Of Us*, *God Of War* and *Uncharted*, Robert Carlyle and company just don't match up.

FAQs

Q. BETTER THAN THE FIRST?
The combat and platforming are better, but the new stealth sections most certainly are not.

Q. GOOD STORY?
Maybe if you can make sense of it. Probably not, though.

Q. HOW DOES IT LOOK?
Inconsistent, but when it looks good, there's not much better on last-gen tech.

DESPITE REGULAR ATTEMPTS TO IMPRESS, IT FEELS DEEPLY UNORIGINAL

Above: A cloak in a science lab? Think of the health and safety implications!

This is a genre that often borrows from its competitors as developers figure out the solutions to common problems, but despite *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 2*'s regular attempts to impress, it does feel deeply unoriginal. The enemies, although well designed, are cribbed from all sorts of sources. There are bad guys that look like they're snatched wholesale from *DmC*, the story borrows liberally from *God Of War* and, again, *DmC*, and there are long sections that you'll swear you've played before. What's the Spanish for deja-vu?

In fact, the game it doesn't crib enough from is *Castlevania* itself. While you can backtrack and find secrets in previously explored locations, and there is a sort of open world hub you can walk around, this is not a game structured like its namesake. The weak puzzles just solve themselves for you in a matter of seconds, often before you even realise there's a puzzle at all. Most involve obvious and telegraphed use of your alternate weapons, but the game rarely lets you experiment or toy with its boundaries. You simply identify the problem and execute the appropriate action, and then continue. MercurySteam laid the foundations for a tremendous action game in the original *Lords Of Shadow*, but seemingly buckled under the pressure.

This is a game that's overly ambitious in some rather strange ways, but there's something to be said for being concise, and some brutal editing would have likely made for a far more beguiling romp through that gothic splendour. A hugely frustrating experience, then. *Lords Of Shadow 2* is a game with flair and gusto that constantly bogs itself down with design choices that should have never made it past the first week of studio meetings. Dracula deserves better.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

A-LIST: The cast is a cut-above the competition, featuring Robert Carlyle, Sir. Patrick Stewart, Jason Isaacs, and *Game Of Thrones*' own Richard Madden (poor Robb Stark).

VERDICT 5/10
A MISGUIDED SEQUEL PEPPERED WITH OCCASIONAL FLAIR



Above: Diddy and Dixie Kong appear as secondary characters, but we found Cranky the most useful.

FOR THE HARDCORE FANS OF NINTENDO'S PLATFORMERS

Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze

If *Tropical Freeze* is your first *Donkey Kong Country* game, you'll probably hate it from the start, especially if your idea of a 2D platformer is based on *New Super Mario Bros. U* or *Rayman Legends.* Enemies and obstacles are not lined up neatly along your path of destruction; they're meant to inconvenience you and continually break your momentum. When you're used to sprints and triple jumps, guiding Donkey Kong feels like dragging a reluctant pack mule. It seems counter-intuitive for a gorilla to be less limber than a plumber, but he is.

Persist, however, and you'll eventually realise that what you thought was either incompetence or cruelty is actually a warning. The easy death at the start of that level, the irregular spacing of platforms in the other, are signs meant to slow you down. And once you stop trying to rush through as you might with other two-dimensional platformers, *Tropical Freeze* reveals itself to have quite a different nature.

The lack of time limits is deliberate. When you're not trying to race to the end in under two minutes, you'll find yourself at the other extreme, taking your time to move through the level and wipe out enemies with care, and most of all searching behind and inside and underneath everything to find as many secrets as possible. Collectables like puzzle pieces and the KONG letters that unlock extra levels are tallied at the end of each level, but even those secrets that aren't – the Easter Eggs – are worth keeping an eye out for.

Rather than give you the start-to-finish flow you get with levels in some other platformers, *Tropical Freeze* encourages players to take the time to learn the lay of the land. And once your eyes are no longer busy trying to predict any upcoming annoyance that you haven't yet memorised, you can start to appreciate the inordinate amount of effort that has gone into the background art. Although the inclusion of icy climes seems an obvious answer for something to break up the green, the designers have managed to coax

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Retro Studios
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

THE DIFFICULTY REFLECTS ITS ROOTS IN TRADITIONAL 'NINTENDO HARD'. IT'S NOT THE ONLY FEATURE REMINISCENT OF OLDER GAMES

FAQs

Q. WHAT'S BEHIND THE DOORS?

Some secret doors lead to timed rooms full of bananas, but more hidden portals lead to other levels entirely.

Q. CAN YOU RIDE RAMBI?

Rambi the Rhinoceros is back to carry you over spikes and even leap across moving platforms in one windy level.

Q. WHO'S WATCHING THE SHOP?

With Cranky called to action, Funky Kong is behind the till, selling you items like life balloons for in-game coins.





Left: Like TressFX for primates, much work has clearly gone into making the individual hairs of Donkey Kong's coat stand out. His fur is so fluffy it looks like it's been shampooed, probably with some tropical variant of Herbal Essences.



Right: Frivolous story about Arctic creatures taking over Donkey Kong's tropical island home, or a statement on climate change?



Below: The way these vines stay relatively stationary even when you try to swing on them never stops feeling counter-intuitive.



plenty of variety out of both sides of the titular tropical freeze.

Increased care will also give you more time with the secondary characters who ride on Donkey's back, since they die first when you suffer damage. Diddy and Dixie can each extend Donkey's limited jump in their own ways, but the best is Cranky, which is more ammunition against first appearances. His pogo-stick cane gives Donkey the ability to double jump, even across a floor of spikes. After that you'll find it even less appealing to play as solo Donkey, which is one reason to avoid co-op play: player one may be able to use the secondary characters if the second player jumps onto Donkey's back, but the rest of the time they're stuck with Donkey.

These secondary characters and a slower pace may help with the bulk of the platforming, but the bosses of each island remain a significant challenge. Rejecting the accustomed rule of three, these creatures assault you with at least half a dozen different attacks and absorb many more of yours before they accept defeat. Worst of all, when you die – and you will, so many times that the repetition of the accompanying tune will start to impact on your enjoyment of the otherwise inventive and varied soundtrack – you have to start from scratch. These long fights are more likely than anything else to make you give up *Tropical Freeze* altogether, but if you do persevere with them they make for memorable achievements.

Of course, that level of difficulty reflects the game's roots in traditional "Nintendo hard", which is not the only feature reminiscent of older games. The occasional 3D camera movement is restricted to things like circling around moments over which you have little to no control, and showing a mine cart section at an angle that just messes with your intuition as to which way you should push the analog stick when you need to switch tracks. The controls feel unfriendly in general. Play with a Wii Remote and you'll have to shake every time you want to roll or do a ground pound. Even if you use the GamePad or a Pro Controller, you have to tap one button repeatedly to move at speed and hold down a trigger whenever you want to grab onto a vine, which feels just as counter-intuitive as the way those vines don't respond to your momentum as in other games.

Little has been done to make the game feel modern. The GamePad has no additional use besides as a way to play without the TV screen. Donkey's fur looks believably fluffy and the animations are improved, but otherwise *Tropical Freeze* could belong to an older generation. Innovation is limited to such additions as Dixie and Cranky (a bonus) and underwater levels (for some players, undoubtedly, a negative). The Kong POW that turns all visible enemies into items is helpful but forgettable, and the ability to pick up enemies and objects is long overdue.

Presumably, however, *Donkey Kong Tropical Freeze* is made for those who don't necessarily want change. The inclusion of a touted hard mode and time trials that can automatically upload footage of your attempts online suggest that Nintendo has that traditional hardcore audience in its sights. While that's encouraging for players who fit that category, many others will be deterred. Those willing to put time into this game will be rewarded, but given that difficulty and the lack of Wii U consoles out there, how many people will?

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

PLUCKABLE: Thanks to inspiration from *Super Mario Bros. 2*, you can now pick up a penguin.
KONG POW: All it takes is a high five, and all enemies on screen turn to balloons, hearts, or coins.

FROZEN TROPICS

You won't encounter winter proper until you get to the sixth island. Before that, you'll travel to: Lost Mangroves, which takes you from beaches to canopies; Autumn Heights, with wind that powers mills and endangers mountaintops; Bright Savannah, susceptible to forest fires; Sea Breeze Cove, with underwater sections; and Juicy Jungle, where the fruit almost matches up to that in *Pikmin 3*. Each environment has its own features, from trees that rise up and sprout platforms, to tornados that can help or hinder you depending on which way the wind is blowing.

BETTER THAN: DONKEY KONG: BARREL BLAST



WORSE THAN: DONKEY KONG COUNTRY RETURNS

VERDICT 7/10
HARD AS ICE BUT WORTH YOUR PATIENCE

THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

The Last Of Us: Left Behind

Below: Less emphasis is placed on crafting given the short length of the story. There's never really any need to stock up on weaponry when there's only a small clutch of combat sections, most of which can be avoided using stealth.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Naughty Dog
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

It has been eight months since *The Last Of Us* was released and *Left Behind* marks the first (and apparently only) slice of campaign DLC, which delves into the backstory of Ellie in a quasi-prequel to the main campaign. Running at only a couple of hours in length from beginning to end, we're pleased to report that Naughty Dog has managed to not only recapture the essence of the characters but has compressed what made us love them in the first place into a fraction of the time.

Joel barely features at all in *Left Behind* but the ethos behind the story very much involves him. The action crosscuts between Ellie searching for meds while Joel lies unconscious (after his fall in the second act of the main game) and Ellie's friendship with a young girl named Riley (featured in the *American Dreams* graphic novel) during her time in the quarantine zone.

The latter is the more interesting of the two stories that make up the narrative divide. Here we see a rather less plaintive Ellie in the throes of her hormone-driven and carefree adolescence (or what little she has of one in this post-apocalyptic world) discovering both the secrets of a forgotten world and something about herself. While Joel often acted as a sombre counterpart to her vivacious spirit, here she's able to share her curiosity for life with an equal, and it leads to some of the most emotionally engaging scenes in the entire saga.

More straightforward are the sections that involve Ellie searching for medical supplies to save an injured Joel. This is where the majority of the game's action takes place, with Ellie encountering infected and other survivors across a series of claustrophobic environments within a dilapidated shopping mall. Naughty Dog doesn't offer much time or consideration for those that haven't delved into the main game since its initial release, throwing players into a series of tense scenarios with tough enemies before you're given a chance to reacquaint yourself with the combat system.

Shooting can feel loose, and archery too gentle, but given Ellie lacks the physicality of Joel, it's unsurprising that *Left Behind* encourages stealth when it's clearly the more viable option when navigating through tiny pockets of this stylised apocalypse. An enhancement to the enemy AI reinforces the necessity for this approach, with infected now attacking human enemies if in close proximity. And it's a more satisfying (if frantic) alternative: hurling a brick towards a group of patrolling survivors, attracting a horde of undead, which serves as a deadly distraction while you carefully circumvent the carnage.

LEFT BEHIND IS A STUDY OF RELATIONSHIPS, THOSE BROKEN, THE ONES IN NEED OF SAVING AND THOSE BLOSSOMING IN UNEXPECTED WAYS

These visceral, nerve-plucking jolts of action also serve as a sharp juxtaposition to Ellie's life before she met Joel. Between the violence and bloodshed Ellie must commit to save someone she cares about, we're shown the tender side to her personality and the lengths she will go to for the people in her life she loves.



BETTER THAN
ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: FREEDOM CRY
WORSE THAN
THE LAST OF US

It's almost an odd choice on Naughty Dog's part to include Riley. Anyone who played through the original and paid attention will know how the story will end and it's a testament to Naughty Dog's deft storytelling prowess – unparalleled in the medium – that, despite the inevitable conclusion, all the humour, drama and tragedy still resonates so deeply.

And it helps a surprising amount that the pair are just so much fun to spend time with. There's an emphasis on fleshing out the supporting cast and characters only offhandedly mentioned in the main game. Notes and artefacts discovered around the environment play a large part in elaborating on the events and people crucial to the fiction, but Naughty Dog takes bold steps to tinker with the gameplay mechanics to further invest players in the story.

There's a ten-minute stretch of gameplay that involves Ellie and Riley chasing each other around a department store in a water fight with pump-action water pistols, we watch



HUMAN DRAMA

We've yet to see a more impressive set of performances captured on next-gen systems than those we've seen in *The Last Of Us* on last-gen, and *Left Behind* continues to deliver sterling acting and emotive animations. One scene in particular focuses on Ellie's face as she fantasises playing a videogame in an abandoned arcade and the depth, nuance and fidelity in the performance is simply astounding. *Left Behind* contains some of the most tangible performances in any Naughty Dog game to date. We can only imagine the level of detail and realism that the developer will bring to PlayStation 4 over the next few years. Roll on *Uncharted 4*!

FAQs

Q. DOES JOEL APPEAR?
Only in a catatonic state. In fact, in the present day scenes an AI partner doesn't accompany Ellie.

Q. ANY NEW MECHANICS?
The only notable enhancement is the infected AI, which attacks human enemies. It makes for more dynamic encounters.

Q. WHAT'S THE BIG REVELATION?
Well, that would be telling. However, the conclusion does fill a gap that leads up to the events of the main game.



Left: There seems to be plenty of ammo littered around the environment for both handguns and your bow. You'll never be stuck without anything to fire.

Above: It's hard to get a grip on shooting and combat in general without the steady pacing of the main game that lead to its bigger action set pieces. Nevertheless, *Left Behind* isn't too overwhelming until the very last skirmish.

as the two share an intimate moment inside a photo booth (which also brings one of *Left Behind*'s funniest moments as the two encounter social media for the first time) and then there's an extended sequence of Ellie reeling off puns from a book she received from Riley.

Each of these quiet character beats is interactive, essential in investing the player in the relationship between these two characters. And *Left Behind* is a study of relationships, those broken, the ones in need of saving and those blossoming in unexpected ways. And while the two storylines don't have any direct relation, it's the commitment that Ellie makes to the people she cares about that is shared across both halves of the game.

In that regard *Left Behind* might not be what every fan of *The Last Of Us* is looking for. The gameplay is overtly divided into two distinct sections: the present, which focuses on action and the past where characterisation is the driving motif. It's easy to imagine how this will jar with some players used to a subtler blend of the two, and admittedly we found ourselves drawn much more to the inventive chapters set in the past. While the set pieces set within the present day offer an intense gameplay experience and an interesting twist on *The Last Of Us*' combat, there's a sense of obligation rather than the cohesiveness we've come to expect from the developer.

Left Behind doesn't quite strike the magnificent and immersive balance of gameplay and story of the main game, but that's nigh-on impossible. What it is, is a poignant and captivating enhancement that should satisfy those enraptured by the time spent with the characters first time around.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TWO HALVES: If Naughty Dog had worked out a way to add more peril to the flashbacks then it could've abandoned the present setting and focused on a more seamless experience.

VERDICT 8/10
A TOUCHING TALE OF LOVE, LOSS AND FRIENDSHIP



Above: Some of *Left Behind*'s most unexpected moments comes from subversive interactive sequences set in the past.

THE POINT-AND-CLICK MAKES A CROWD-FUNDED COMEBACK

Broken Age Act 1

Perhaps the most high profile release of the early wave of Kickstarter games, *Broken Age* is Double Fine's attempt to break away from the normal way of doing things. So it's fitting that its story should focus on two characters trying to escape – one a mundane routine, the other a potentially fatal ritual. And yet at heart, it sees Tim Schafer return to familiar territory, namely the point-and-click genre he played such a key role in defining during his time at LucasArts in the Nineties.

The man behind *Grim Fandango* and *Full Throttle* and who co-wrote *Day of the Tentacle* and the two best *Monkey Island* games: it's no wonder people were lining up to throw money at Double Fine, with Schafer receiving over $3 million from backers to bankroll his vision. And while you can see where the money went, there's an unexpected lightness to *Broken Age*. As one of the most publicised crowd-funding successes, it represented a watershed moment for creators, encouraging and enabling others to look for alternative methods to finance their games, free from publisher interference. And yet it's a game that mostly seems unburdened by the immense pressure placed upon its slender shoulders. It's got a lot to live up to, and yet a few minutes in you'll realise it's perfectly happy to do its own thing. And if that means certain expectations are confounded, so be it.

Both stories are a rite of passage for each character, as they learn to fight against the status quo. Vella is preparing for the Maiden Feast, where she's to be sacrificed to a giant squidlike beast named Mog Chothra in order to keep her home village of Sugar Bunting protected from harm for 12 months. Shay, meanwhile, lives out a lonely existence on a spaceship, mollycoddled by an overbearing AI 'mother' who treats him like a baby, and unsuccessfully attempts to inject some excitement into his day by sending him on spurious rescue missions involving sentient soft toys in fabricated peril. We're introduced to the unhappy pair before they take the decision to change their stars, at which point the stories really begin to kick into gear.

Coming-of-age tales are hardly new, but *Broken Age*'s narrative defies convention at every turn. Vella encounters friendly lumberjacks, deadly snakes and a family

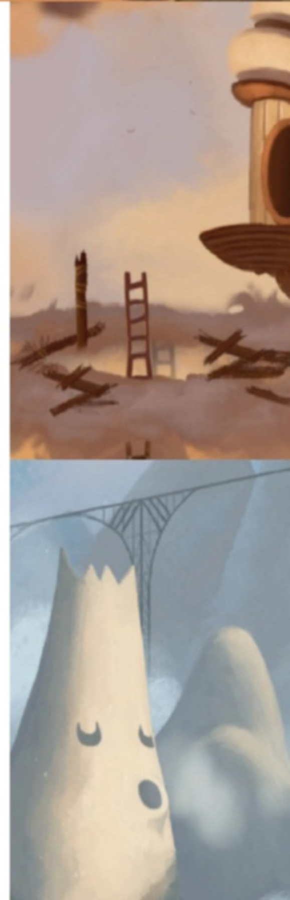
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: iOS, Android, Ouya
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Double Fine
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £18.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC : 1.7 GHz Dual Core, 2 GB RAM, Nvidia 260GTX/ ATI Radeon 4870 HD/ Intel HD 3000, 1500 MB free space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Below: Among the funniest moments is a brief sequence involving a paranoid lumberjack who's scared of wood. Interrogate him about a torn painting hanging above his fireplace and he'll confess he ripped the trees out because "they were looking at me." Right: There are several charming idle animations. Vella might stand with arms folded, or lift her feet up to examine the underside of her shoes.





MONEY WELL SPENT?

What does $3m plus change get you these days? If *Broken Age* is anything to go by, some beautiful art, a fine musical score and terrific vocal performances. Sure, it's taken time to produce – and given Schafer's well-documented tendency to miss deadlines, it could be a while before we see the concluding chapter. Yet there's a lesson here to other developers working on KickStarter projects: start small, and build up. The idea of a 'complete half' may sound like an oxymoron, but ignore the absence of *Act 2*, and it doesn't feel like anything's missing. The budgetary constraints of crowd-funded projects have a habit of making themselves known in the finished game, but not here. It's proof that small but perfectly formed is preferable to a longer, rougher product.









FAQs

Q. HOW LONG?
You'll likely be done in around three hours, unless you get stuck.

Q. BEST PUZZLE?
Probably the one involving a vomiting tree.

Q. ANY SURPRISES?
An early setpiece is thrilling and funny all at once.

that lives above the clouds, while Shay finds hidden routes and rooms around his home, while fulfilling clandestine quests set by an enigmatic stowaway. You may or may not guess how the stories are tied together, but you'll rarely be able to predict where you're headed next. Meanwhile, Schafer's writing eschews the broadly comic tenor of his previous efforts, with a more heartfelt, emotive tone. That isn't to say it isn't funny, of course – as with Schafer's previous games, often the best lines are saved for incidental interactions – but there's warmth and wisdom to accompany the wit.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

PUZZLE QUEST: We'd welcome some more challenging puzzles. Fingers crossed that *Act 2* has some more elaborate conundrums, or at least throws in a few red herrings.

As an adventure game, meanwhile, it adopts a relatively easygoing approach. This isn't a game where you're likely to be stuck for very long. Unlike the pick of Schafer's LucasArts titles – or, indeed, any point-and-click from that era – you'll rarely be left attempting to use myriad items on different persons across several locations until you stumble across the right combination. On the face of things, this would seem to be progress, and yet you're arguably given a little too much of a helping hand, not just with the item descriptions, but with the limited nature of your interactions. Move the cursor around and areas and objects of interest will not only be highlighted, but the appropriate action is chosen for you. This not only simplifies the solutions to the game's puzzles, but denies the opportunity for Schafer to cram in the sillier gags that often made the challenges of those 16-bit classics that much more enjoyable.

Removing these roadblocks has its upside, however, as it means the narrative can maintain a brisk pace, with a regular flow of new sights and new characters to chat with. It's a typically Schaferian cast of oddballs and mildly dysfunctional everypersons, each with recognisably human idiosyncrasies, and it's brought to life by a voice cast that nails the tone (no doubt thanks to some assured direction). Elijah Wood skilfully underplays Shay's evident frustration, breaking into barely-concealed glee as he wriggles free from the daily grind, while a reined-in Jack Black provides a rather subtler line of humour than he's known for as a narcissistic cult leader. It's Masasa Moyo who steals the acting honours, however; her Vella is an instantly likeable rebel, spirited and defiant.

BROKEN AGE'S NARRATIVE DEFIES EASY CONVENTION AT EVERY TURN

Her personal struggle is a fairly obvious metaphor for the pressures women still face in modern society – albeit one presented in an outlandish fashion – and it's easy to empathise with her plight. It helps, too, that the visuals are pitch-perfect. The hand-drawn art and stop-motion animation makes for a stylish and unusual aesthetic, and it's an ideal match for the tone of the script: soft-edged and warm-hearted. As with the rest of *Broken Age*, there's nothing flashy or grandiose about it, it's just another sign of a game that's been crafted with loving care.

This is only *Act 1*, of course, as an agonising cliffhanger reminds us, and as such this can only be regarded as a very promising start. Whether or not the concluding part offers the increased breadth and complexity many will be clamouring for as the credits roll is unclear. But it's hard to see anyone reaching the middle point of Vella and Shay's story and not wanting to stay tuned to see where they end up.



Above: Voiceover veteran Jennifer Hale is perhaps the pick of the supporting cast as Shay's maternal protector. Shay finds her wheedling, overprotectiveness and persistently cheerful demeanour irritating, and yet her affection for him feels curiously genuine. Left: There's both pathos and humour in Shay's early attempts to escape his routine.

VERDICT 8/10
A BREEZY YET HEARTFELT ADVENTURE. ROLL ON ACT 2.



Above: Some of *Fable 2*'s softer touches are conspicuous by their absence. Death is real – you can't just pop back to life – and the omnipresent breadcrumb trail is a mere twinkle in Peter Molyneux's eye.

IT'S ALBION, BUT NOT AS YOU REMEMBER IT

Fable Anniversary

***Fable Anniversary* is a fascinating example of both how far the industry has come and how little it's actually progressed.** Here is a decade-old game with systems, combat and mission design not hugely dissimilar to what you might find in something today, but also one with antiquated animation, stilted performances and a narrow, almost claustrophobic scope. It feels both modern and ancient. A curious chap indeed.

Of course, *Fable* will always be remembered as the game that reached too far; or at least the game where its creator spoke about reaching too far. Promises like growing acorns into oaks fell from Molyneux's mouth excess spittle, unwittingly promising the Earth for a game that could never hope to live up to it. This led many to chastise *Fable* and decry its eventual limitations as barefaced lies from the marketing team. Yet, it has always been a case of a creator speaking about his dreams, his grandest ideas, rather than a cynical over seller. Molyneux was just guilty of speaking in ambitions rather than absolutes.

Those who managed to ignore Molyneux's naïve ramblings, though, were treated to an ambitious and light-hearted RPG that pioneered choose-your-own-adventure morality and did so with a smirk. Here was a game where you could murder a villager one minute and fart in a blacksmith's face the next and, at the time, the world reacted to you in a believable and impressive way.

Fable Anniversary obviously maintains much of the original's charm, and does so under a tidy new lick of paint. Lionhead has roped in Unreal Engine 3 to turn the angular sprawl of Albion into a textured, layered world suitable for modern times. While a touch muted in its palette, *Fable Anniversary* is a perfectly lovely-looking game, especially when the hazy backgrounds cast light over the narrow woodland corridors or you creep around one of its beautifully imagined townships under the darkness of night.

The same cannot be said of its characters. While the models themselves look great, the animation belongs two console generations in the past, with NPCs that pivot on the spot and stare blankly into the camera as their mouths spurt out stilted lines of dialogue. These are the costs of an HD remake, but they universally yank you out of the experience.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Lionhead
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

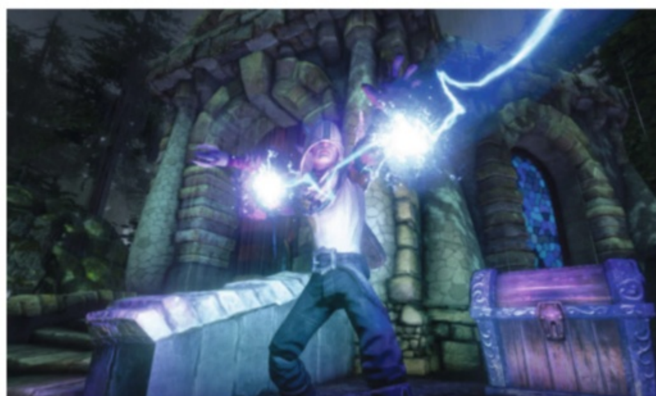
GAMING NEEDS INDIVIDUALITY AND CHARACTER AS MUCH AS IT NEEDS MECHANICS AND SYSTEMS

FAQs

Q. SO WHAT'S NEW?
Unreal engine, achievements, some new weapons and a lute.

Q. HAVE PROPER SAVES BEEN IMPLEMENTED?
There are checkpoint saves and you can save manually at any point. 'Hero' and World saves are a thing of the past.

Q. ARE THE LOST CHAPTERS INCLUDED?
Yes, they are. Lionhead considers them canon.



Below: Sidequests may seem intriguing from their cutscenes but they almost always result in a fetch quest. In truth, those who are looking to experience the story at its strongest are actually best served sticking to the beaten path and ploughing through as quickly as possible.



Right: This won't be as revered as the *Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary*, as the gameplay systems are not as timeless and replayable.

Below: The visuals are lovely, if a little pale. Sharp textures and maps can't mask the ancient animation rigs underneath, though.







Still, it's an experience that has aged better than some. *Fable Anniversary*'s structure is reasonably competent; you pick up quests from the Hero's Guild then plod out into the world to hack up baddies or escort traders through scary marshes. As expected, there are choices to be made at every path, and carving yourself out as an almighty hero or feared monster is still entertaining, mostly because of the amusingly English idiosyncrasies of Albion's denizens.

Fable was also among the first to introduce the concept of player choice physically affecting your avatar, and it's still an entertaining system. Act with pure intentions, save villagers and slay baddies, and you'll be strutting around town looking like Robert Pattinson with a shiny halo above your head. Start hacking up innocents and deliberately choosing the nasty, evil options in quest lines, though, and you'll soon sprout horns, glowing scars and a permanent scowl.

However, there's no mistaking the progress that *Fable 2* made in fleshing out the concepts and promise of this world, and *Fable Anniversary* does feel limiting. While the world and its inhabitants do react to your presence and make reference to your deeds around Albion, they're also rather quick to forget. On top of that, the actual world itself feels very small; essentially an interconnected series of open-air corridors with very little scope for exploration or discovery. And of course, there's no dog. You'll be surprised at how much you miss that scruffy little guy when you're strolling around on your lonesome.

After picking up a mission from the Hero's Guild, you wander out into the world in search of your now-instanced quest. Most of your time spent in missions, and indeed in Albion in general, will be in combat, with *Fable*'s now-familiar three-pronged assault allowing you to mould your own character as you see fit. Should you choose to attack with melee, by hacking and slashing basic combos at predictable foes, then you'll become stronger. Keep your distance and fire arrows, and you'll gain smarts and guile. Or turn yourself into a mage by firing lighting bolts and fireballs.

How you kill your enemies determines which orbs they drop. It's a more organic and satisfying way to level up than manipulating stat-sliders; part of *Fable*'s efforts to make the RPG feel more substantial and less calculated. The downside to all this combat, though, is that it turns the game into a trudge. *Fable*'s button-mashy battling soon gets tiresome. This is a game of long walks and unsubtle scraps, and doesn't have the action chops to back up its incessant brawling.

Thankfully, as both a museum piece and a game in its own right, *Fable Anniversary* is unquestionably crammed full of charm. The regional British accents that are littered throughout the game are still a joy to hear (although the quality of line-delivery is massively inconsistent), and it would take a cold heart to not laugh at the Hero Of Albion farting into a crowd of disgusted villagers.

The game itself may plod and ponder rather too much, and has unquestionably been bettered by its sequels (particularly *Fable 2*), but it's nice to see something quintessentially English get such a loving treatment. *Fable Anniversary* is a timely reminder that gaming thrives on individuality and character as much as it does on mechanics and systems. However, what separates the true classics from the norm is a careful balance of all the above, and *Fable*, unfortunately, just never quite made that grade.

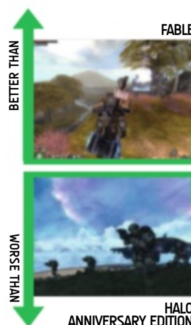
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

OOH ARR: There still haven't been many other games that feature prominent West Country accents, and they're instantly funny in *Fable*.

SMART ARSE

One of *Fable Anniversary*'s standout features is its use of Microsoft's SmartGlass app. Often, second-screen experiences can prove distracting, but here it's a nice accompaniment. At first, it seems like you're given a basic map, but dig deeper and there are some lovely ideas that prove additive. The best of these are the comparison shots that show how areas in the game looked in the original Xbox version of *Fable*. The contrast is startling – crude angles and low-poly detail. It's amazing how much work has gone into repainting Albion by the talented artists at Lionhead.

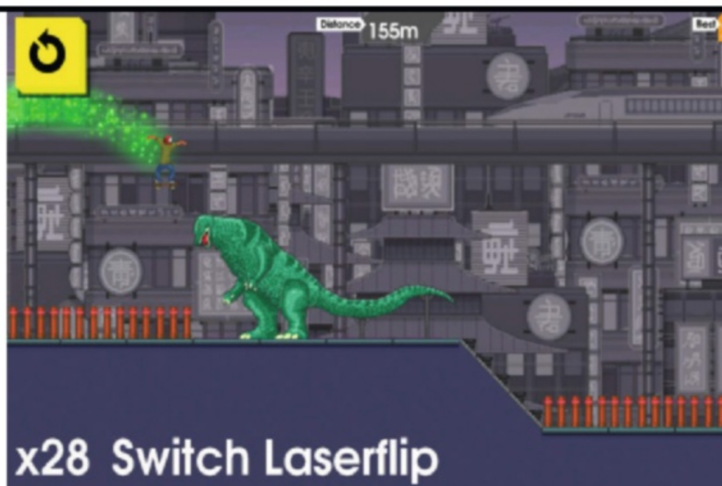


VERDICT 6/10
CHARMING AND FUNNY, SLOW AND PLODDING. THAT'S FABLE.

HEAVEN IS A HALF-PIPE

OlliOlli





Above: The variety in the five levels is surprising, but when all the challenges revolve around 'pull off this move', 'collect these things', 'grind this' or 'land everything perfectly', it's easy to see through the formulae which the game is comprised of.

The difference between traditional skateboarding games and actually skateboarding used to be the fear of bailing – in the myriad *Tony Hawk's* titles, for example, you were never too scared of face-planting, the consequences were never too severe. In *OlliOlli*, kissing the concrete means one thing; complete and abject failure.

The central theme of *OlliOlli* is reward – it's a side-scrolling 2D skater with a focus on flow. You must trick your way from the top of a run to the bottom, grinding and flipping all the way to achieve the biggest multiplier. The control scheme in the game is comprehensive – use the D-pad or Vita's left stick to manipulate your board and pull off various grinds or airborne tricks. Combine these combos with the L or R shoulder buttons and you can build up a string of moves and get your score into the seven-figure domain. Landing a combo yields a palpable sense of achievement.

One of our major issues with how the mechanics handle, however, is the muddy middle-ground between modifying your air tricks with L/R and pulling off special grinds with the same buttons. We get that the game is a test of your reflexes, but the indeterminate timing required for pulling off the harder grinds feels like an oversight – trying to rotate mid-air, even with the right timing, can lead to you bailing and, therefore, massive amounts of frustration.

But perhaps that serves to make to make the whole game that much more addictive – being constantly thrown from your board is as compelling as it is annoying. The game's insistence on starting you over on a course *every* time you bail infects you with a just-one-more-go mentality that will keep you up until 3am, trying to complete all five challenges on each map.

While there isn't a lot of variety in the game (five maps with five runs on each, making 25 levels total), the design of each course serves to constantly challenge you, making sure the game never becomes too easy. With the Daily Grinds – which are challenges you get only one go at – in place too, *OlliOlli* has enough meat to keep you coming back for more.

Aside from a couple of issues with the handling and native control setup (we always opted for the D-pad, because the Vita sticks don't suit the über-precise nature of the trick inputs), *OlliOlli* is a solid game – another jewel in Sony's indie crusade. It should come with a warning; once you crest its steep learning curve, it becomes subtly addictive – we managed to pump six hours into it the night we installed it. And that was only the beginning…

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Roll7
DEVELOPER: In-House
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
TONY HAWK: RIDE



WORSE THAN
TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER

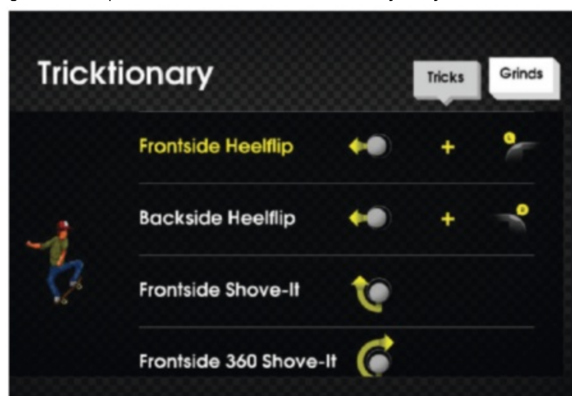
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WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GETTING ON-BOARD: While leaderboards are present, you can only see where you stand globally – the addition of friends' scores would make the score attacking in *OlliOlli* even more appealing.

VERDICT 7/10
OCCASIONALLY FRUSTRATING, YET FUN AND INNOVATIVE

Below: The Tricktionary is a compendium of techniques and their corresponding inputs, which is surprisingly expansive. The inputs themselves are reminiscent of 2D fighting games, but the precision needed for the tricks is more fiddly than you'd think.







Left: Opening up a vent will not only release pressure, but also make every block of the corresponding colour worth more points – it's always worth gunning for the vents as soon as the level starts.

THE LIGHTNING RETURNS…

Surge Deluxe

There is only so much you can do with the basic match-three formula; variations of the genre have been floating around for generations, tending to find an audience with the more casual gamer. By releasing *Surge Deluxe* for the Vita, Futurlab has subverted that norm – the Vita is typically seen as the home of the hardcore gamer, and a match-three game on the system hits upon a strange boundary between casual and core gameplay.

The title makes good use of the Vita's responsive and precise touchscreen – your goal is to trace lines between similarly coloured blocks and work your way to the sides of the screen, unblocking vents and eventually clearing the level. Calling *Surge Deluxe* a match-three title is actually a little deceptive – your chains can be extended to any number you'd like, as long as all your colours match.

The standard game mode sets you on a course through an infinite series of levels, making you work your fingers quicker with every passing level. At first, the game is fun and frenzied – as different types of block start to get introduced, you have to alter your strategies and think about how you're going to make the biggest combo: chain blocks allow you to change the colour of the chain you're working on, multipliers boost your score, switchers keep changing their colour and frenzy blocks make everything on the screen chainable.

As the main game goes on, you have to think about what you're doing less and less. Each level sees a timer bar deplete as a pressure bar rises – should the pressure build up too much, game over. Should your time run out, game over. The challenge therefore lies in working out a happy medium between combo-ing enough for a good score while completing each level before you fail. Unlocking the vents at the side of the screen can reduce pressure, and in the later levels it feels like a mad rush to unblock these before the pressure becomes critical. Perform well enough and the game will shout "CYBORG!" at you. Once you get good, all you will hear is an annoying robot voice shout "CYBORG! CYBORG! CYBORG!". After a while, that's exactly what you feel like – an automaton matching colours while nothing much else really happens.

Longevity is granted by Puzzle Mode – a series of predesigned levels that function better as tutorials for the best ways of creating combos than actual puzzles. But if you're after value, Surge Deluxe delivers: it's pretty, it's cheap and it's a good quick game to play Just don't expect anything game-changing.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PSVita
ORIGIN: England
PUBLISHER: Futurlab
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £3.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
CANDY CRUSH SAGA



WORSE THAN
PUZZLES & DRAGONS

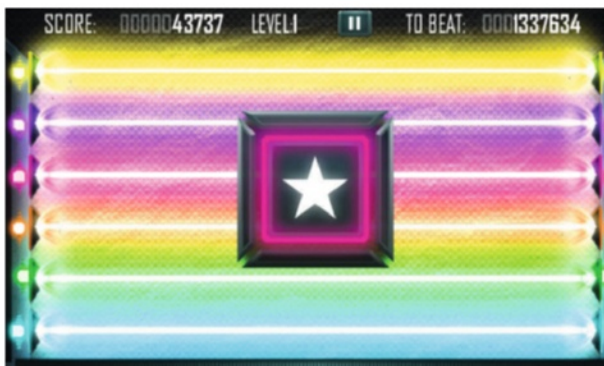
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK: The touchscreen controls are the best thing about this game, we just wish there was an option to touch the back screen to open the vents or something. A missed opportunity.

VERDICT 6/10

FUNCTIONAL AND PRETTY, BEST PLAYED IN SHORT BLASTS



Right: This is Puzzle Mode – a good training mode; it teaches you how to make the most of the various blocks that appear in *Surge Deluxe*.



WINTER HAS COME

The Banner Saga

Right: Combat isn't changed much from free-to-play multiplayer component *The Banner Saga: Factions*, but that depth is still present. There's a lot to think about in a turn, from attack type, positioning and even who is attacking next.

There's a point, towards the end of *The Banner Saga*'s tale, where you and your gathering clansmen are up against it. Food is scarce, morale is at an all-time low and you've been played for a fool by one of your warriors. It's at this all-time low that you're struck with a wave of self-doubt: was it wise to accept that band of starving wanderers into your ever-marching group? Perhaps you should have been more hard-nosed; this is the end of the world after all. You'd have had more food if you had fewer mouths to feed, and seeking to help everyone you can seems to have bitten you in the arse. But then, had you shunned every passer-by looking for assistance, would your loyal followers from your hometown of Skogr have been so willing to continue in your footsteps? Did you do your best?

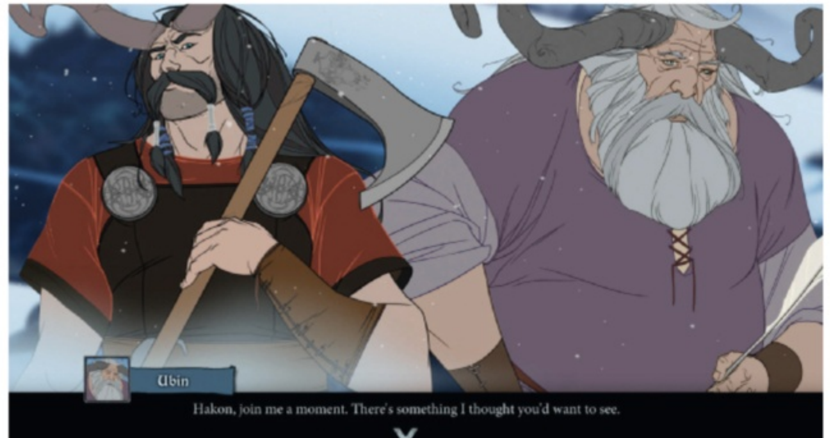
It's an interesting dynamic that *The Banner Saga* introduces. It's clear there's more to this game than a series of grid-based strategic combat arenas, and though the combat is undoubtedly exceptional it's in the sense of leadership – and the struggle with difficult decisions – where *The Banner Saga* shines. But first it's probably better to set the tone.

This is the first of three parts in the saga, but even still it has a pretty bleak beginning. The sun has stopped in the sky, basking the world in a permanent glow and signalling – at least to the superstitious – the end of the world. It's hard to disagree when, at the same time, an ancient enemy called the Dredge – a hulking and barbaric race of rock golems – begin travelling south, destroying villages, killing citizens and causing your own small settlement to pack up and leave for safety behind a larger town's walls.

Plans fall into disarray, the real truth of the dangers are revealed and your main playable character Rook is thrust into the limelight as the only person capable of leading. This is a story amicably told: sure, there is little in the way of voiced dialogue and even fewer cut-scenes, but what *The Banner Saga* does have is a rich world simply dripping with detail. It's easily evidenced by the large map you can view at your leisure, and while you'll be travelling along a fairly strict path, there's so much periphery that has been added that the depth of the lore is almost tangible as you travel across the world.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Stoic Studios
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £18.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 4.3 GHz CPU, 512MB GPU, 2GB RAM, 3GB HDD
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Above: You actually play as two protagonists, though playing as Rook consists of about 70 per cent of the game. Hakon, seen on the left, is Rook's Varl counterpart and commands a large force of soldiers. His job is not done in part one of the saga, though.





And travelling is only one part of the game. To look at it mechanically there are three phases to *The Banner Saga*: travelling, camping and fighting. The former is perhaps the simplest, watching your tiny crowd of clansmen trailing from right to left as you attempt to outrun the ensuing Dredge horde. As you progress the days pass, and with them your supplies dwindle. Periodically, though, you're prompted with an interruption, whether as simple as meeting a lone stranger and choosing how to handle him or encountering a battalion of stone warriors and figuring

Right: You might be tempted to use 'Renown' to upgrade your warriors, but that's also the same resource used to buy supplies for your clansmen to survive with. Choose wisely.



THIS IS ONE OF THOSE RARE GAMES THAT BELIES ITS HUMBLE ORIGINS TO PRODUCE SOMETHING THAT MOST GAMERS OUGHT TO EXPERIENCE





FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
All told it'll take about 12-15 hours to see the first chapter of *The Banner Saga* to its end, which is more than enough.

Q. IS THERE A CLIFFHANGER?
Yes and no. There's enough of a conclusion to be satisfied, but a greater evil has yet to be encountered.

Q. IS IT EPIC?
It is, but in the same way that *The Hobbit* films are. It is the beginning, with greater challenges expected in the future.



IN TIMES OF WAR...

One area where the next chapter of *The Banner Saga* really needs work is its 'war' feature. At certain points in the game your collection of warriors and clansmen is greeted with an equally sizeable force, and the only option is a large-scale battle. Superfluous attempts at giving you some sort of commander role have been added in, but they are almost entirely unnecessary. These battles against 700 or more Dredge can be solved simply by charging in, whereby your squad of six will duke it out against fairly challenging – but not impossible – odds, resulting in only a handful of your additional forces being lost when compared to the other options. It has a lot of promise, but in its current form is lacking.



out the best way of tackling them. It's at these points that effects can be garnered, like gaining supplies for the caravan or losing warriors from your troop. Sometimes, the cost of your decision isn't felt until much later.

Setting up camp, on the other hand, comes in two forms, either a rest forced by yourself or at specified locations throughout the world. Most often these are major towns, places to buy supplies for the next leg of the journey and upgrade your squad of fighters. Additionally they'll often act as key storyline points, prompting you with far more serious decisions to make that could play out immediately – likely in a battle – or much later down the line in ways you might not have predicted. Though the decisions you'll make might not seem that important, *The Banner Saga* still has a particularly savvy way of making you care about those you've sworn to protect.

Then there's combat, which perhaps surprisingly hasn't maintained the focus of the review. What might look like a typical grid-based strategy RPG actually hides a considerable amount of depth. Most interesting is the armour/strength mechanic, whereby each unit must manage both stats. Armour, as you might expect, protects from damage, while strength acts as both your health and... well, strength. You can only deal damage to one or the other, however, pulling you into a constant balancing act of choice. Should you weaken an enemy's armour but run the risk of taking a full-strength attack later on? Or maybe use a heavy hitter to soften that enemy's strength but make it harder for weaker units to deal serious damage in later turns? It's a very smart risk-and-reward system that makes *The Banner Saga*'s battles layers deep. Add in Willpower – a limited means to boost a unit's attack or movement – and you've got a rich system that is thoroughly enjoyable. The only real criticism is for the lack of variety in battles. While you will be pit against humans and Varl at particular moments, for the most part you'll be battling the Dredge and there isn't enough difference between the unit types to make combat seem diverse enough.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

WHEELS OF WAR: While the gorgeous art style of *The Banner Saga* might be its most immediate standout element, the armour/strength mechanic in combat is truly original – and makes for some tense combat decisions.

It's a minor slight on an otherwise slickly produced strategy game, especially since the battles themselves are always completely absorbing. *The Banner Saga* is one of those rare games that belies its humble origins to produce something that most gamers ought to experience, if not for the game's deep combat system then for the tale that has been woven and the impact you're going to have on it. It's an outstanding start for a trilogy, and one that we can't wait to see to its end.

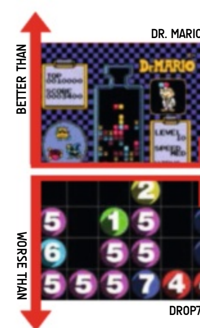
VERDICT 8/10
THE START OF SOMETHING SPECIAL

WHAT A WAY TO END A YEAR

Dr. Luigi

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In House
PRICE: £13.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2



Plenty has been said about Nintendo's recent troubles after drastic cuts in the Kyoto firm's sales forecasts for the coming year. While some predict gloom and doom, the counter argument has always come in the publisher's software, which at its best is completely untouchable.

Dr. Luigi, though, is probably the most galling indictment of Nintendo's current plight. It's a well-made game, a remake of *Dr. Mario* with a few new ideas and a bit of a graphical respray, but it's selling for an eye-watering £13.49. When most block-puzzle games are free and almost none cost more than a couple of quid, you have to ask just what Nintendo is thinking.

Not that it's a bad game, of course. The colour-matching gameplay of *Dr. Mario* returns, with bi-coloured capsules needing to meet three other 'squares' of the same shade to connect then disappear. Match three coloured squares to a bug of the same colour, and you'll clear it out. Eliminate all the bugs to win. Simple, effective, enjoyable.

The Luigi twist comes with L-shaped capsules, which at first look like they should break apart like *Lumines* squares but only do so when half of a capsule disappears in a completed line. It's a more thoughtful mode that the old-fashioned small-capsule game, but hardly worth firing up the Wii U for.

There are multiplayer modes and a tricky effort that forces you to use the touchscreen to drag capsules around, but this is hardly groundbreaking. That mode is rather too fiddly anyway, with the gamepad requiring a tap-to-shift trajectory and a drag to move. All too often you'll end up tapping when you wanted to drag, and vice versa.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

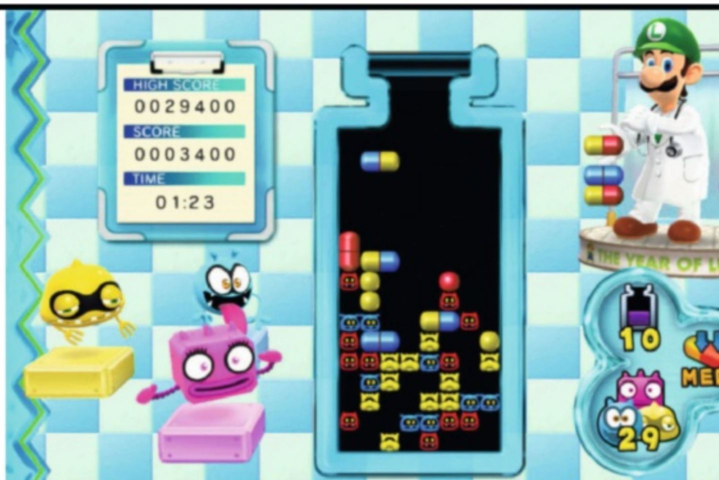
YOUNGER BROTHER: Given that it's been more than 20 years since the pharmacy opened, renovation was long overdue, although with much the same layout, perhaps some extra work was required.

Dr. Luigi almost feels as if it should have been something Nintendo gave away for free as a thank you to those who have sided with its much-maligned new console. Asking for a premium indie-game price is just madness.

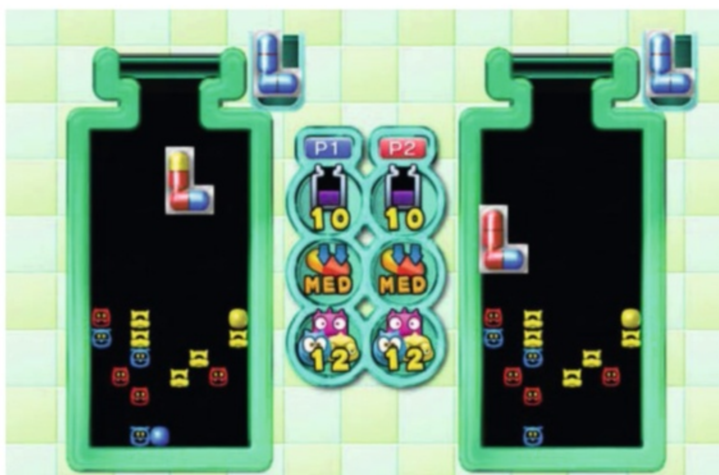
Talking about pricing is often counter-productive in games criticism, but here it's different. The value perception is created by Nintendo itself as it insists on recycling its own ideas, and even in the vaunted *Year Of Luigi*, it's hard to justify such a price tag.

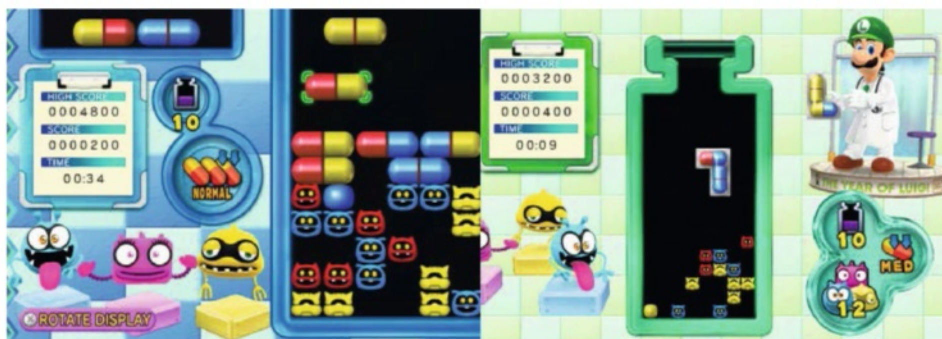
So if you're feeling particularly flush and have some yearning to play another block puzzler, *Dr. Luigi* does a fine job of sitting somewhere in the middle of this well-worn genre. Hardly a glowing endorsement, and a pretty sad way to end Luigi's very own year. Let's hope 2014 is the year of Link, or Samus, or even someone new. Otherwise 2015 might be the year of no more Wii U.

VERDICT 5/10
PERFECTLY PLAYABLE, BUT NOT AT THAT PRICE.



Above: While the surrounding animations are pleasant to look at, the actual game screen is underwhelming, with no effort at a clean modernisation and few bells and whistles. It's hard to work out what you're paying for here.





Above: Nintendo's output on Wii U has been strong, but *Dr. Luigi* doesn't belong in that category. This is a limp end to the year of Mario's brother.

DARKNESS DESCENDS

Blackguards

The premise of *Blackguards* is intended to raise an eyebrow by way of the fact you command a convicted murderer and a bunch of misfit companions, who in the process of evading the law find themselves increasingly tasked with saving the world of Aventuria. This is a bleak and corrupt world, more in line with the grubby Dark Age fantasy of *Game Of Thrones* rather than anything Tolkien might have come up with, which means that while you have a criminal record hanging over you, really you're just a misunderstood guy/gal who almost certainly was caught by the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time. Not so much a story of redemption, then, as one of revenge, which is fine given that in between the lines of awkward dialogue and humourless characterisation is an often infuriating but ultimately rewarding game of turn-based combat.

Moving around the world by clicking quest locations on a hand-drawn map, *Blackguards* offers an initially fairly linear progression of battles, starting off in forest clearings and crypts, moving later on into taverns, dungeons, across swamps and town squares. The battles themselves, of which there are close to 200, initially seem simple, with characters taking turns based on initiative, during which there is a movement and/or an action phase in which spells can be cast, arrows fired and swords swung. All of this plays out as you might expect, with the added tactical layer of there being all sorts of environment dangers and opportunities to consider, from furniture that can be used for cover, to traps that can be turned on the enemy. Indeed a good proportion of the maps make excellent use of puzzle dynamics, ensuring that while brute force always has its place in combat, it isn't always the most economical way to win an encounter.

While the game rewards those who persevere, *Blackguards* isn't an easy game to love. Beyond the fact the story isn't nearly as nuanced or as dark as it wishes it was, there are a host of UI problems that limit the game's accessibility. An inability to properly rotate the camera is a persistent frustration, leaving you only able to raise the view to a top-down perspective, which becomes necessary in busy battles lest you select the wrong target. In tandem with the radial menu it's all too easy to miscue or misdirect commands. Perhaps if there was an undo function we could forgive such issues, but alas we couldn't find one. Needless to say the reload key was in heavy use, which given the fact that the game can only be saved before or after battle encounters and that you're regularly thrown into combat without warning, all add to the list of irritants that could so easily have been avoided. A tactical game this good deserves better.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Daedalic Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.2 GHz CPU, 4GB RAM, GeForce 8600 or Radeon HD 2600 GPU, 20GB HD
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: POOL OF RADIANCE: RUINS OF MYTH DRANNOR



WORSE THAN: BATTLE FOR WESNOTH

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

THE SIMPLE STUFF Better camera controls, UI tweaks, in-battle saves, an undo function and some work on the loading times would collectively make a huge impact.

VERDICT 6/10

SUPREMELY TACTICAL RPG LET DOWN BY BASIC FLAWS

Below: Levers can be pulled, crates smashed and chests opened, often rewarding some tactical advantage. Given how often your party will be outnumbered, you may need all the help you can get.







Above: Each character has a movement phase and an action phase, not too unlike *XCOM*. Unfortunately the selection user interface is a lot less intuitive than it should be.

Below: Thanks to tight levels designed around four-on-four team battles, boredom before, during or after a match is rarely an issue.





DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Edge Of Reality
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 1.8 GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 6800 or Radeon HD 4830 GPU, 4GB HD
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
BATTLEFIELD HEROES



WORSE THAN
TEAM FORTRESS 2

UNDRESSED TO KILL

Loadout

In an age where it's almost a requirement to offend others when online, given that *Loadout* allows you to dispense cartoon mutilation with your pixellated junk flapping about, there are surprisingly few people acting out such inhibitions. Perhaps it's because the cost to have one's strides removed is prohibitively expensive – around £30 – that such naked exuberance is more embarrassing to indulge in than it is boastful.

As eye watering as some of the prices in *Loadout*'s vanity emporium are, you have to give credit to the developer of this third-person multiplayer shooter for attempting to solve the free-to-play/pay-to-win conundrum. Here Spacebux is the currency requiring real-world coin and it's used to unlock extra character loadouts and gunslots (of which you only start with a couple), buy various time-limited XP boosts and, finally, to add or subtract various items of clothing from one of three hideous avatars, thus ensuring other players are impressed with your prodigal wealth. Blute is the currency that *really* matters and rather pleasingly it's earned solely via the process of killing and team conquests.

Blute is necessary to unlock new weapon parts, which is where *Loadout* attempts to distinguish itself from other freely accessible cartoon shooters. There are four types to build on, Rifle, Pulse, Beam and Launcher, from which you can switch out various stocks, scopes, barrels, triggers, mags and ammo types to hopefully end up with a gun that suits your play style. As you level-up, more parts become available and various bonuses are applied from XP grinding to keep you interested. It's a good system, if only for the fact that you can never be entirely sure what an enemy player is packing, until you expose their rib cage and take their weapon from their twitching bloody stumps.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

WEAPON CRAFTING It seems all the rage to offer billions of weapons, but whereas in *Borderlands* you must find them in the wilderness, in *Loadout* you have to unlock each component.

Where *Loadout* doesn't quite reach the heights of its contemporaries is in the breadth of the gameplay rather than the game lacking in polish. Gunplay is immediately accessible, and where progression through the levels might feel gratuitously slow, the game at least tries to be amusing, even if it's rather heavy-handed and obvious with the laughs. While it's a nice touch that after being shot you may find yourself running around with a bellowing stump where your arms used to be, or eyes-on-stalks in place of a head, the joke does tend to wear thin.

Loadout's problems are of quantity rather than quality. With just a handful of maps and only mildly distinct variations on team deathmatch, capture-the-flag and point control, the comedy appeal of the game and its piecemeal progression of weaponry does start to seem flimsy before too long.

That's not to say *Loadout* isn't worth investigating. Even without the new weapon parts, characters and maps that will be joining the roster, it's a worthy side-dish to whatever passes for your multiplayer main course.





VERDICT 7/10
A TIGHT-FITTING SHOOTER THAT'S FUN ON THE SIDE



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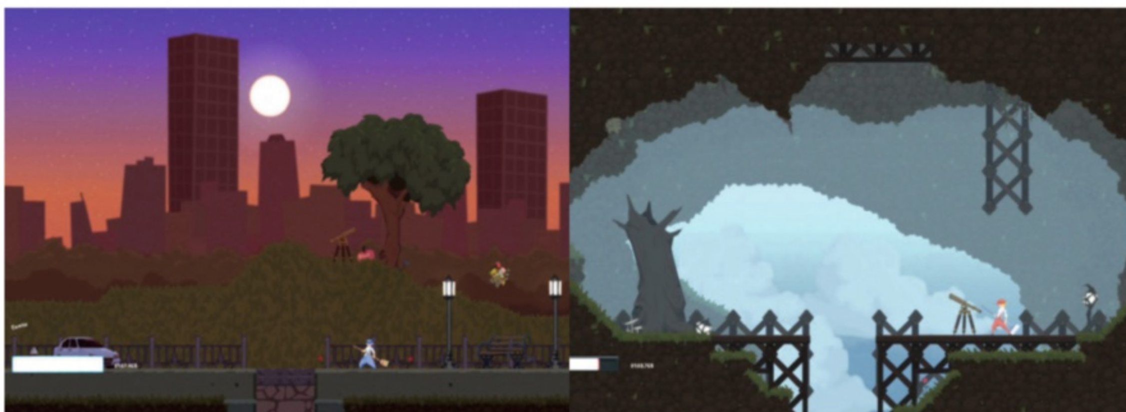
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Left: Many of us enjoy a tough platform game, otherwise *Dustforce* would have died an obscure death on the PC – from which all these devilishly tricky titles always seem to originate.

BROOM BROOM, SWEEP THE ROOM

Dustforce

Anyone who thinks modern games don't offer the challenge they once did clearly hasn't spent much time with small number of sadistic platformers that seem to exist only to annoy. The likes of *N+*, *'Splosion Man,* and even *Super Meat Boy* on occasion seem to have been devised not just to test lightning-fast reflexes, but to mock those without the ability to quickly perfect their pixel-perfect muscle memory and progress beyond the first pangs of annoyance.

As much as it initially exasperates, *Dustforce* quickly reveals itself to be a game that fosters the desire to attain perfection. The aim through unremitting trial and error is to reach the end of each themed level by leaping about and swiping all the surfaces clean that are pocked with dust, leaves and grime, with the obvious time punishment for touching spikes or being shunted around by human-sized filth monsters. The more dirt you eliminate and the quicker you reach the end, the higher your final score, with keys awarded to unlock doors behind which lurk ever more devious stages.

While the barrier to access new levels is punishingly high, hair-pulling frustration is reduced somewhat by a hub-based system that allows you to try harder elsewhere rather than suffer the ignominy of repeatedly bashing your bones against brick walls. Moreover levels increasingly offer multiple paths, allowing audible sighs of relief when a shortcut is spotted between platforms that may shave microseconds off a completion time.

While there are four characters to choose from, each one offering a clear advantage over the others either in movement speed, attack, jumping or the adhesive qualities that aid with navigating walls and ceilings, finding the best cleaner for each level is as much a case of suck-it-and-see as mastering the levels themselves. While the levels translate well to the smaller format and the controls are tight and responsive, the minimalist and leaden graphics of the landscape seems even bleaker when reduced to the Vita's dimensions.

Being a game built for precision and speed it seems churlish to criticise the game on such a superficial lack of detail, but as we've experienced on the aforementioned *Super Meat Boy*, graphical charm is an excellent salve for an enraged soul. *Dustforce* does itself no favours for having such a grim outlook, but when a game offers this much challenge it's easy to brush such criticisms under the carpet.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS3, Xbox 360 (May)
ORIGIN: Australia
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: Hitbox Team / QLOC
PRICE: £6.79
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN 'SPLOSION MAN



WORSE THAN SUPER MEAT BOY

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

SCREEN CLEANER: The 50-odd original levels return, with online leaderboards and 4-player PSN and ad-hoc multiplayer for the Vita. Cross-saving with the PS3 version is supported.

VERDICT 7/10

HOUSEWORK EXPRESSED VIA THE MEDIUM OF GAMES



Above: If you leave dirt collecting for too long, it will evolve into sentient life and take over the home. Thankfully in *Dustforce* you have a range of attacks to deal with the infestation.



Left: Hunting for buried objects on a beach may not sound like fun, but the joy is in what you uncover. While this is part of a mission, there are many incidental interactions that can easily be missed, encouraging you to explore each area thoroughly.

IT'S… MONTY PYTHON'S FRYING CIRCUITS

Jazzpunk

One of the first things *Jazzpunk* asks you to do is to sit down; you press E, and your character obliges. Shortly afterwards you're asked to do the same in a different chair, only this time you can clearly see a Whoopee Cushion placed where you're about to park your backside. You can't proceed without sitting, and you know exactly what's going to happen when you do, yet the result – and yes, you really will hear it emit an authentic Bronx cheer – is funny all the same. It's here you first begin to realise that not only is *Jazzpunk* not like most other games, but that Necrophone Games has a rare understanding of how to make interactive comedy that really works.

The trick, it seems, is to blend telegraphed punchlines, where you're laughing in anticipation, and moments of spontaneity, where the surprising result of a simple interaction is what tickles your funny bone. You'll attempt to speak to an NPC but knock them from a gantry, their fall accompanied by a Wilhelm scream. You'll attempt to enter a room through an open window, only to perform a stylish forward roll. You'll aim a pointed finger to adjust the hands of a clock, only to realise your arm was a wooden prop as it falls to the floor. And then you're given a swatter to rid a vase shop of its fly infestation and you know what's coming before you even step through the door.

An unpredictable blend of the witty and the base, where puns meet slapstick, and highbrow and lowbrow humour rub shoulders with alarming frequency. It's gleefully unhinged, its narrative taking shape across a surreal series of vignettes involving spies and robots, giggling geishas, trenchcoat-wearing henchmen and so much more. All of the above happens within an hour of starting the game, and the game only gets more daring from there. Pop culture references abound, but they're employed skilfully, avoiding the easiest gags, while drawing from some unlikely subjects – including *Demolition Man* and Adam West's Batman.

In many respects, *Jazzpunk*'s systems are unremarkable. Rudimentary puzzles, basic interactions, and often wilfully mundane tasks. At times, it attempts jokes that miss their target, sometimes by a distance. And yet such is its fearless, relentless commitment to amusing you and surprising you that you'll know something better or weirder is just around the corner. Anarchic, baffling, downright silly, and often inspired, *Jazzpunk* works tirelessly to make you laugh and gasp. The frequency with which you'll do both is a testament to a bold new talent, and Necrophone Games deserves all the plaudits that will be thrown its way in the coming weeks.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Adult Swim Games
DEVELOPER: Necrophone Games
PRICE: £TBC
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP SP2 or higher, 1.80GHz Processor, 2 GB RAM, Video card with 512MB of VRAM, 2GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: THE STANLEY PARABLE



AS GOOD AS: GONE HOME

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

KEEP IT STREET: There are playable tributes to a number of games, the best of which might just be a first-person Street Fighter homage. If you've ever wanted to see how a Tatsumaki looks through Ryu's eyes, now's your chance.

VERDICT 9/10

ONE OF THE FUNNIEST GAMES YOU'LL EVER PLAY





Above: It isn't the most technically dazzling, but the art is consistently vibrant and varied. The off-kilter soundtrack and distorted vocals contribute to the distinctively surreal tone, while the individual spot effects have been carefully selected for maximum comedy impact.



Above: Prop heads will enjoy pitting and fitting planes of different eras against one another.

THOSE MAGNIFICENT MEN IN THEIR FLYING MACHINES

World Of Warplanes

Successor to the prosperous *World Of Tanks*, Wargaming's latest opus *World Of Warplanes* takes the fight to the skies in the form of a massively multiplayer flight sim. Rooted in PvP encounters, *World Of Warplanes* is free-to-play and encourages online combat between players in the cockpits of fighter planes and bombers native to the five main aggressors of the Second World War. The appeal of *World Of Tanks* was rooted in its simple, compulsive PvP encounters and polished online experience. *World Of Warplanes* has adopted much the same template, pitting players against each other in 15 versus 15 deathmatches in which each team has to either wipe out every enemy aircraft or attain air superiority by destroying ground targets and the like.

This results in the game being fairly one-dimensional; the battles themselves are very enjoyable, but they play out much the same way every time. A lot of FPS players will default to a team deathmatch as it is a more unadulterated form of competition, yet the arsenal of other game types that they have available to them always keeps the action fresh. *World Of Warplanes* has one game type, with not many different ways to play it.

What *Warplanes* does is toe the line between stern, dazzlingly complex simulation games and the sort of frenetic action available from arcade flying games. You get all the beautifully rendered real-life World War Two aeroplanes, sure, but they've been thrown into a cocktail shaker with *Ace Combat* and Maverick's preposterous attitude towards safe conduct in *Top Gun*.

What we're left with is a game that, despite its best intentions, feels a little muddled. What *War Thunder* has done so well is create an environment that is accessible enough for rookie pilots to whizz around while listening to Kenny Loggins, and hardcore enough for veterans of *Microsoft Flight Simulator* who prefer games with 3,000 different keyboard commands but feel like trying something 'a bit more shooty'. This has been done by introducing different realism levels; something that Wargaming hasn't offered with *World Of Warplanes*.

The experience is that of an arcade-style flyer with a decent online infrastructure, but

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Ukraine
PUBLISHER: Wargaming
DEVELOPER: In-House
PRICE: Free-to-play
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: Massively Multiplayer
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.66Ghz CPU, 3GB RAM, 256Mb GPU, 19GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

LIKE MOST ARCADE FLYERS THE GAMEPLAY IS SO INHERENTLY BASIC THAT IT LOSES ITS APPEAL IF YOU ARE INTO HARDCORE FLIGHT SIMS

FAQs

Q. WHERE ARE THE PLANES FROM?

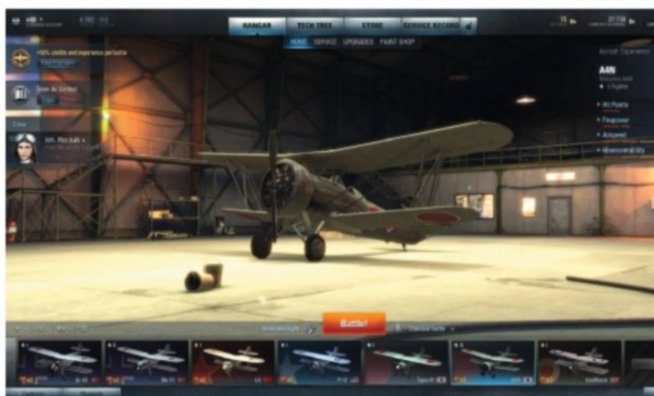
The aircraft available in *World Of Warplanes* are native to Britain, Germany, Russia, Japan and the USA.

Q. IS IT REALISTIC?

Not really, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing. Even if you are a plane boffin you can still enjoy this game.

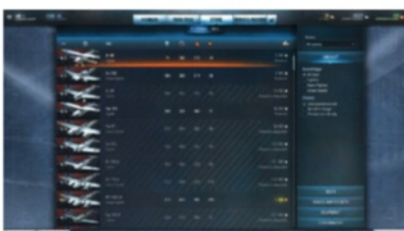
Q. ARE THERE MANY PEOPLE ONLINE?

The servers have been live for a while, so you'll find *World Of Warplanes* to be well populated when you log on.





Below: Sometimes you can't help yourself – playing chicken with other planes doesn't always pan out like it does in *Pearl Harbor*.







Below: *World Of Warplanes* holds up nicely in terms of graphics, and the environments that have been designed for it are decent renditions of the sort of battlegrounds that were commonplace during the Second World War.

like most arcade flyers the gameplay is so inherently basic that it loses its appeal fairly quickly if you are into the more hardcore variety of flight sim. If it's a simpler, more harmless experience that you're after then *Warplanes* is a good place to start, and may pique your interest enough to invest in a more technical sim at a later date.

Simplicity isn't necessarily a bad thing, though. In terms of gameplay *World Of Warplanes* holds up very well, whether using a joystick, controller or mouse and keyboard. It is worth noting that, like all flying games, in our opinion using a joystick is the most responsive and enjoyable option. When attempting to manoeuvre into position to slot the BF-109 you've been tailing through the desert, using a mouse just doesn't cut it, especially if you're up against intelligent opposition.

All in all though, the planes handle well. As you near enemy aircraft a red hit-box appears that indicates how much lead you need to give your opponent when firing at them, an addition that yet again will delight fair-weather fans but will make life a little too easy for hardcore players. You really can throw the planes about to your heart's content – plenty of times we found ourselves nose-diving from 2,000 meters towards a grassy knoll only to be able to turn on a dime and pull up at the last second. It looked bloody great, mind. And of course, like in any combat flight game, snagging a kill is extremely satisfying.

Graphics and sound hold up nicely as well – we've played prettier games but, in the case of an MMO with a hell of a lot going on at once, *Warplanes* can be forgiven for not looking like *Battlefield 4* on Ultra. Draw distances are as proficient as you'd expect in a game of this nature, and the plane models themselves – perhaps best admired in the hangar – are accurate and well-realised.

World Of Warplanes' most contentious facet, though, is that of its microtransactions. We are in the midst of an influx of free-to-play titles that hide their most desirable wares behind a pay wall. Of course, titles like *PlanetSide 2* peddle the sort of free-to-play experience that gives the movement a good name, wherein everything is unlockable over time and the only benefits to glean from spending real currency are cosmetic. *World Of Warplanes* pretty much slots into this category. Almost every aircraft *is* unlockable over time, although the grinding required to advance through the vehicle tiers will take an enormous amount of patience. There are a few planes locked away for 'Premium' account holders as well, although the discrepancy isn't troubling enough to lose sleep over.

World Of Warplanes is a neat addition to Wargaming's repertoire, but it all just feels a little too shallow to really make waves. Like recent online PS4 releases *Warframe* and *Blacklight: Retribution*, it hints at some wonderful online content and decent gameplay, but feels like it's only scratching the surface. The online features themselves are good and we encountered no server issues whatsoever (on a modest broadband connection, too), there are a multitude of unlocks to earn if you have the patience and there is infinite potential for updates. What there isn't, is a game worth investing a huge amount of time in when you can play its direct competitor, *War Thunder*, and enjoy an experience with more depth. Still, it's free, and will provide you with a decent experience – only, in our case, for a finite amount of time.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

MATCHMAKING: Players are thrown into games with opponents using aircraft of a similar tier, autobalancing the game nicely. We were impressed with the servers themselves, and their waiting times as well.

LIVING MULTIPLE LIVES

When you're downed in a battle, your involvement is over. This leaves you with two options: you can either remain in-game and spectate, or you can exit to the hangar. If you opt for the latter, you have the option to hop into a different plane and jump into another battle. It's a neat system; if you die in a game and exit you still get the experience points and rewards when the battle ends, win or lose. This system greatly lifts the experience – having to wait for ten minutes to play again after being winged by a teammate in the opening seconds would be the worst.

BETTER THAN: TOM CLANCY'S HAWX



WORSE THAN: IL-2 STURMOVIK: 1946

VERDICT 6/10
A HARMLESS PLEASURE, SOMEWHAT LACKING IN DEPTH

Below: *Legacy*'s open world design means that while exploration is possible, many areas are deadly to those parties that haven't levelled up sufficiently, or taken down the requisite boss creature.





BACK ONCE AGAIN FOR THE ROLE-PLAYING MASTER

Might & Magic X: Legacy

There have been a few attempts over the last few years to revive old RPG franchises that have long seemed bereft of life. Paddles were applied to the carcasses of *Ultima* and *Wizardry*, in both cases doing little but frazzle what magic remained. Now we're poised over the stirring body of another venerable RPG series, thinking that there might be just enough of a spark to stir it back to life.

It helps that *Legacy* is a *proper Might & Magic* game, in the sense that it's reminiscent of the series' roots as opposed to being a genre-opposite or a microtransaction-fuelled rebrand. It doesn't follow on from *IX* as you might expect though, which is perhaps just as well given its predecessor is now 12 years old and the series had long veered off its narrative course already. Instead *Legacy* offers up a heady reminder of when RPGs were all about selflessly vanquishing evil, poring over the party creation screen and having an old maths exercise book close by in which to map your progress.

There are a few concessions to RPG evolution. Cartographic skills are no longer necessary and clearly 3D graphics have come on leaps and bounds, although it's fair to say that *Legacy* is still far from being the shoestring *Skyrim* that some would like it to be. *Legend Of Grimrock*, with its nostalgic tile-based movement, is *Legacy*'s closest point of reference; only instead of exclusively dinking around dungeons, the world here is somewhat more visually basic, despite being largely above ground and far more varied. We can happily report too that in keeping with the RPGs of old, the turn-based combat is rather more tactical than in *Almost Human*'s 2012 throwback, and all the more satisfying for it.

Where *Legacy* feels dated is in how the world has been fleshed out. The story is a mush of sub-Eddings high fantasy, with wordy dialogue trees that often reveal only repetitious banter. In towns there are NPCs that serve only to annoy and very little surface detail alluding to being in a living world. Combined with the occasional near-impossible battle out in the wilderness such aberrations remind you how tightly designed RPGs have become.

Yet it's these infrequent, but odd inconsistencies with our modern-day expectations that add to the game's charm, a reminder that while RPGs have become ever more spectacular, their scope for exploration and tactical challenge has perhaps diminished. *Legacy* doesn't convey the greatest of first impressions, but the more you explore of the game's venerable interior the more you find yourself falling under its spell, to the point that upon its conclusion you may find yourself seeking out its forebears before pining for the next *Elder Scrolls*.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Limbic Entertainment
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Vista SP2, 2.6GHz CPU, 4GB RAM, 512MB GFX, 10GB HD
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: MIGHT & MAGIC IX

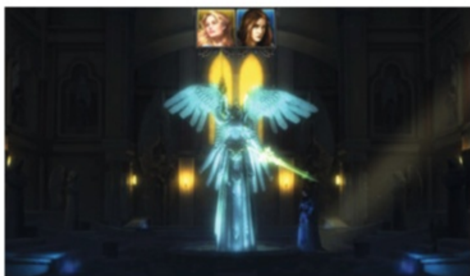


AS GOOD AS: LEGEND OF GRIMROCK

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

CORE BLIMEY: It's fair to say that *Might & Magic IX* was a bit of a mess when it first arrived, to the point that its developer soon went out of business. If nothing else, *Legacy* builds on firmer foundations.





VERDICT 7/10

A DELIGHTFUL REMINDER OF HOW RPGS USED TO BE

> "At the time it felt like games could really do this; they could, from nothing, create an entire planet into existence"
>
> ALI HOPE, CREATIVE ASSEMBLY







WHY I ♥... Mercenary

ALI HOPE, CREATIVE ASSEMBLY

It was an 8-bit game created by Paul Woakes. It was a game where you crash-landed on a planet. It was early 3D and I thought it was beautiful. There were two sides at war and you got to choose which you wanted to support and you had these interactions where you can play the sides off each other. You went through this amazing, beautiful looking world – even though it was basic. And it's a very old game but at the time it felt like games could really do this, they could, from nothing, create an entire planet into existence. There was also a sense of exploration, there was this really amazing world where you can explore and learn about the people who lived there and what they were after. I think that's the game I've been thinking about recently and it really blew my mind. It's a phenomenal game and someone needs to remake it.





RETRO

NO.145 MARCH 2014

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Released: 1999
Format: Windows, Mac OS, Linux, Amiga, Dreamcast, PS2, XBLA
Publisher: Activision (as well as Loki Software, Sega and EA)
Developer: id Software
Key Staff:
Graeme Devine, designer
John Carmack, programmer
Adrian Carmack, graphics
Jan Paul van Waveren, bot creator

BEHIND THE SCENES

QUAKE III ARENA

Hardcore gaming came of age with an uncompromising approach to single and multiplayer gaming. games™'s heart takes a beating as we look back

IT IS A game that is some 15 years old, but that hasn't prevented it from continuing to be talked about. In 2011, a rather bizarre story began to emerge surrounding *Quake III Arena*, the popular, pure first-person shooter which swept aside any sort of plot and made its debut on the PC in 1999 to immense fanfare.

A player, it was reported, was intrigued by the game's artificial intelligence. He liked the clever way that the bots didn't just walk up and down in a set pattern but instead learned. He was rather taken by how these bots figured out how best to annihilate players and understood how someone played, before it conjured up fresh tactics to outwit people.

In 2007, he set up a *Quake III Arena* server and had 16 bots face each other again and again. In 2011, he returned and noticed that the bots were standing still and facing each other. There had been no attempts for them to go for the kill. They had, he surmised, learned that the best way to survive was to stop killing each other. It was perhaps an indication of how world peace could be achieved.

Except it wasn't. The story was picked up in the middle of 2013 by various media but it was later found to be untrue. Which is a shame, although Graeme Devine, the Glaswegian coder who designed *Quake III Arena*, was unfazed about the whole issue anyway. "Could bots eventually just stand around?" he asks. "Yes, but probably due to a float error. As floating point numbers grow, their accuracy decreases so over time their accuracy becomes meaningless."

And yet the fact that this 'news' was picked up on at all said much for *Quake III Arena*. Its design, its graphics and its concept ensured that it was a game that didn't just fade away as the millennium took hold. It was a game that people played, experimented with, perhaps wanted to spin yarns about because it was good to talk about great games. By honing the deathmatch to its purest sense and marrying it with reaction-dependent, rapid action-based play, id Software achieved something very special. It is exactly what its co-founder John D Carmack had desired.

"My take is that John wanted to make a pure 'internet' game and move on from the story-driven *Quake II*," says Devine, who was drafted onto the project shortly after it had begun. Carmack and Devine had talked and emailed for years. Both had made their mark on the videogame industry. Carmack had already been named among the most influential people of all time by *Computer Gaming World* magazine and was well known for his work as the lead programmer of *Commander Keen*, *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Doom*, *Quake* and *Rage*. Devine, along with Rob Landeros, had founded Trilobyte, which produced *The 7th Guest* and *The 11th Hour*. It closed in 1999 but it had formed a great legacy along the way.

BY HONING THE DEATHMATCH TO ITS PUREST SENSE, ID SOFTWARE ACHIEVED SOMETHING SPECIAL

"WHEN TRILOBYTE CLOSED we continued to talk and John asked me to go to Texas to chat with himself, Kevin and Adrian," says Devine, of the meeting that led to his involvement with *Quake III Arena*. "They were looking for someone like me, with a technical and design background, to bridge the technical aspirations of the project, which was to be an internet game with creative aspirations, which was to still be a cool game. I moved out to Texas soon afterwards."

Right from the start it was decided that *Quake III Arena* would change the way games approached single-player. In 1998 id Software had announced that Trinity, a technology project Carmack had been



The Plasma Rifle was lethal, but not as much as the mighty Rail Gun.















>. A GAMING EVOLUTION

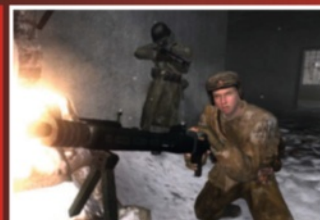
Sonic The Hedgehog > Quake Arena III > Call Of Duty



Well, it influenced *Quake III* to a degree, anyway. The bounce pads could have been inspired by the blue critter.



Quake III Arena's engine, id Tech 3, was used by Infinity Ward to produce its incredible military first-person shooter.







Blood-splattered walls and a high-tempo atmosphere with multiple players was *Quake III Arena*'s hallmark.

working on, was being scrapped. It was set to maximise 3D graphics accelerators and seamlessly integrate streaming, server-side Java code in gameplay. The developer said Trinity was to be canned because id Software wanted a greater concentration on multiplayer modes. *Quake III Arena* was the game that emphasised this to a great degree.

"There was never a thought to make *Quake III Arena* a single-player game in the classic sense besides what we shipped in the box," says Devine. "In that sense *Quake III Arena* is an arcade game, pure and simple, and I think it works really well as a single-player game."

The decision was criticised – *PC Zone*'s review said "it smacks of laziness and penny-pinching", but id countered that it didn't have the resources nor the time to develop a mission-based solo adventure. The single-player mode enabled gamers to battle against 30 AI bots over eight different tiers containing 26 levels of various complexity and size. It took the ethos of multiplayer and kept it pure. Sure, playing against real people was *Quake III Arena*'s strength but the bots were damn fine opposition too.

"It was tough to do," concedes Devine. "We eventually hired a programmer from Holland called 'Mr Elusive' [Jan Paul van Waveren] who had written a bot for *Quake II* that was really good."

Van Waveren loved first-person shooters. During his last years at secondary school, he made a lot of levels for *Doom* which he distributed through a BBS. He progressed to *Quake* and loved the way it played through a local network or over the internet. By 1997, he had become very intrigued by bots and had produced one called Omicron that could reliably simulate a human player. Within two weeks, it was close to being the most popular *Quake* bot around.

For van Waveren, *Quake II* altered the landscape further. AI was programmed in C and id Software had released the source code so enthusiasts like van Waveren could adapt parts of it. His bot for *Quake II* was the result: human players could state their opponents' weapon preferences and whether they would be more happy to attack or defend, but it could easily depart from that and be less predictable. The Gladiator bot was released in December 1998 and, in June 1999, Devine wrote to van Waveren and asked him to visit the team in Dallas to swap some ideas. It only took a few days to adapt the *Quake II* bot for *Quake III* and van Waveren subsequently sold them the source code. The developer also employed him to help further integrate the bot into the game and to extend the bot code.

GRAEME DEVINE
Designer



"He wrote the bot code for *Quake III* and I gave them the personalities," says Devine. "I would sit behind two testers from Activision for hours at a time and change the numbers for the characters up and down by single digits and then rewatch the same game with the same testers over and over. We were altering their accuracy, love of a weapon, response time and so on and we didn't use any tricks. The AI doesn't cheat and some of them play in a very human manner while others are just *Terminator* Hunter-Killers. We got the characters we wanted and a fantastic programmer to boot."

The *Quake III* bot worked over four layers. The bottom layer contained the information the bot could acquire and the actions it could take, using this to determine where it should go. The next layer handled short-term objectives that were used to determine what could and should be done; the bots weighed up the pros of cons of a situation. The third layer set out longer-term goals and dealt with strategy; it posed questions essential to survival. It then used this to deduce its moves, working out what was best to do at that

WHAT THEY SAID...



Quake III Arena is truly a beautiful thing. Detailed architecture, fluid character movement, fast relentless action – the purest deathmatch experience you'll ever have.

PC Zone, issue 86, February 2000



Quake III Arena was ported by Raster Productions and released by Sega for the Dreamcast in 2000. Four players could play online against Dreamcast and PC gamers.

moment and whether it needed to solve a problem or whether it needed to battle with an opponent.

"A LOT OF the artificial intelligence for the *Quake III Arena* bots is based on common sense solutions," says van Waveren. "But there are also several technically advanced solutions to solve some of the hard problems like route and path finding. I gained a lot of experience creating the Omicron bot for *Quake* and the Gladiator bot for *Quake II*, and a lot of the solutions are as a result of that experience." Getting all of this right pleased the id Software bosses who emphasised technology above all else. Releasing the source code later showed how much of a triumph ofprogramming the game was. "The *Quake III* source code was very clean and nice to read," says Devine, adding, "I think they probably took all the swear words out of the comments too."



JAN PAUL VAN WAVEREN
Bot creator

Letting programmers take a peek under the hood to see how BSPs and the like really moved was a way of seeing what others could do with the game and whether or not some notable talent could emerge. "Id is about tech, tech, tech and then tech," says Devine. "If something changed that meant the artists had to redo everything, then that happened." He said id Software was a melting pot of creativity with some of the best and smartest people on the planet making a game. At the same time, it made life tough. "They are passionate and will argue and demand the same of you in return," he says. "It could chew you up inside if you let it, and the pressure was incredible, but it takes pressure to make diamonds."

The complexity, however, wasn't supposed to be passed on to the gamers. Design was deliberately minimalist. The graphics were superb and the engine proved to be incredibly slick. It had cutting-edge character animation, sparking lighting effects, fast play and noticeable intensity. It would cause palms to sweat. The decision was made to let players plunge in and get on with it.

"Adding any kind of menu system was hard," Devine says. "John didn't want a menu system; he wanted it to be completely internet-based and use a browser to launch the game. In retrospect that was a good plan, but it was ten years too early. We designed and added the menu system as the last component to *Quake III* under the direction of Kevin Cloud, who is absolutely fantastic at layout and design and getting the right look down to the pixel."

The feeling that gamers just wanted to play and not get bogged down with the plot was also stark. "Oh, the immortals taking the heroes of each world and time to pit them against each other wasn't a plot? How could you miss that!?" laughs Devine. "Activision had big worries about the single-player but I don't think we did. When q3test went out on the internet and zillions of people played it, we felt somehow vindicated with

Many would argue that *Quake III Arena* has yet to be bettered, certainly as a pure deathmatch experience.





FROM THE FORUM

Posted by:
MERMAN
My main memory is from the Dreamcast version, constantly looking at the ceiling or the floor as I tried to look around for the opponents who were using me as cannon fodder…

Posted by:
SHINYMCSHINE
I had the PS2 version, but I'm not a fan of deathmatches, hence very disappointed by the lack of a proper single-player "campaign".

Posted by:
RICHARDJONES129
The game had me gripped from the start. It looked stunning and I loved fragging my mates. I wasn't sure about the narration – it felt a bit *Mortal Kombat*.

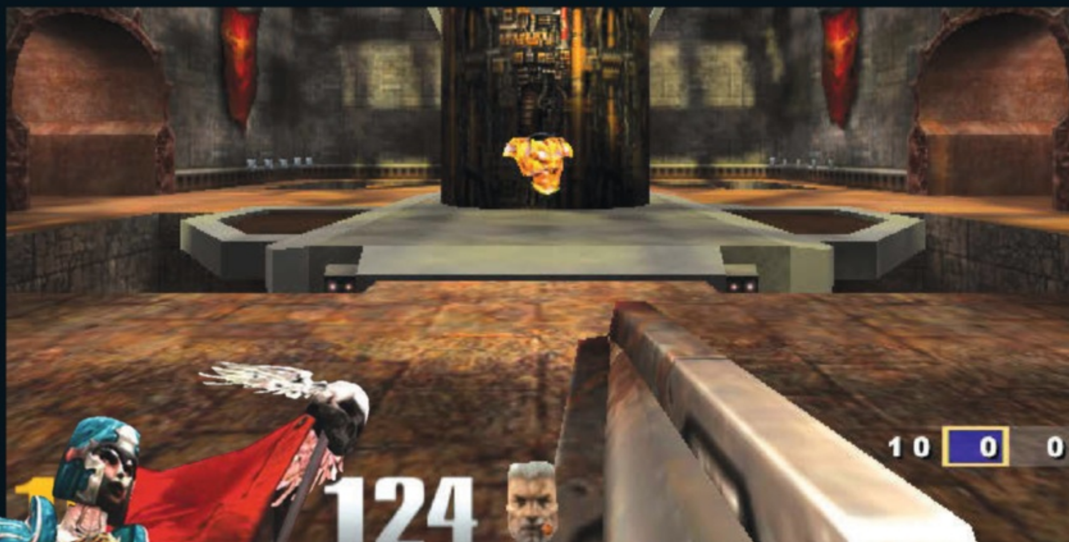
The ports

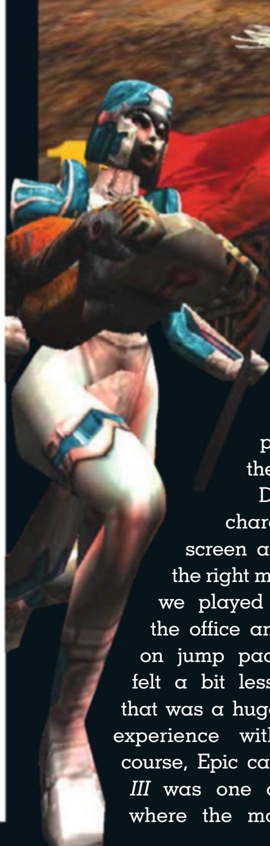
As well as receiving an official port for the Dreamcast, which allowed gamers of either the PC or Sega's console to play against each other, the game also appeared on the PS2, courtesy of Bullfrog Productions, but its loading times were excruciating.

It's the unofficial ports which are most intriguing, though. There has been a release for iOS via Cydia for those with jailbroken devices and it has also found its way to the PlayStation Portable, but the biggest headturner has been the Raspberry Pi edition that was shown in August 2011 to be running a specially compiled ARM version on Debian.

You can find this by going to **www.store.raspberrypi.com/projects/openarena?adult** and it actually runs faster than many people would have experienced when the original version of *Quake III Arena* was launched.







the internet-only feel of the game. That said, we didn't feel the single-player was a cheat – it was just a straight-up arcade game. Are people disappointed with the plot in *Space Invaders*?"

Devine loved the way the characters shifted around the screen and he still feels it has just the right movement. "I remember when we played the first *Unreal* game at the office and some of their movement on jump pads and accelerator ramps felt a bit less fluid than ours. We felt that was a huge advantage for the overall experience with *Quake III Arena*. Of course, Epic caught up, but I think *Quake III* was one of those 'Mario moments' where the movement was 'just right'."

Some of the movement was indeed inspired and lifted the game in a literal sense. Bounce Pads and Accelerator Pads took over from lifts and ladders and they would throw players into the action in any direction they wanted to go. It sped the game up and cut out any cumbersome waiting times. With the addition of the Flight powerup, which allowed for swift platform-to-platform movement, and teleporters, which would propel a character to a random spot, the action shifted around at a fair old pace.

Being hooked up online brought its own issues, though. Internet lag had caused problems for some games and, as Devine says, *Quake III Arena* was introduced to the world at a time when bandwidth and connection speed was rather low. A 56kbit modem struggled at times but the programmers at id Software tweaked the code no end to ensure that it would be less of a problem with *Quake III Arena* than with other similar games trying the same thing at the same time.

"At the time it was the only thing you could really play on a 56kbit modem that looked awesome," Devine says. "We worked a lot on the network compression and eventually security but the multiplayer over a modem was incredible for the time. Everyone takes the internet for granted now. It's on every machine 24/7 and if it's not you're weird. Back then it was the opposite."

With potential internet problems in mind, they made sure that everything included in the game was there purely on merit so that it wouldn't bloat. It led to rows: "We argued a lot. About everything. Every feature. In a good family-like argument if you were all brothers and didn't mind the odd bit of yelling," says Devine. But it was also creative. "It was one of the best creative processes I've been through where we would spend hours discussing the angle spread of the shotgun and how many pellets it would shoot and what damage each pellet would achieve and what the accuracy of each pellet was within the spread. Each and every feature fought to be there and if it didn't win it was gone."

Customisation was also important to the team and id Software wanted players to feel they could control all aspects of the game and feel a sense of ownership. "Everything could be customised," says Devine.

The Arena Gate map was released as part of the demo.



"I remember years later John and I walked around a QuakeCon watching people play in tournaments and people had the field-of-view set to wide, textures switched off, shadows off, everything to a minimum, and John remarked that wasn't what we intended when we made the game. We added the ability for tournaments to set the player variables after that so all players had the same specs."

EVERY FEATURE FOUGHT TO BE THERE – IF IT DIDN'T WIN, IT WAS GONE
GRAEME DEVINE, DESIGNER

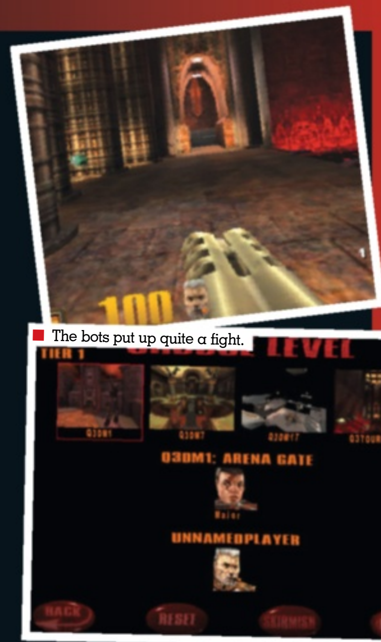
FOR DEVINE, A level playing field was vital if the feeling of being on a side in a game was to truly work. He was used to team-based games – "Like playing in teams on *Warcraft II*," he says – and that drove much of the thought behind an expansion pack called *Quake III: Team Arena*, which was released at the tail end of 2000. Fan mods had already covered much of what *Team Arena* went on to implement, but it showed id was aware of the need to focus on new game modes, team play, fresh weapons, player models and items.

Not that the existing weapons weren't much cop. The spraying machine gun, the power of the grenade launcher and the satisfaction of the melting plasma gun sat alongside railguns, rocket launchers and shotguns. Trying to frag with the gauntlet was nigh on impossible but the reward in doing so was richly satisfying.

All of this combined to make *Quake III Arena* a near-perfect offering and one that still proves popular in some professional e-sports tournaments. That it reviewed well for its weapons, special effects and textures – but less well for the narrator's voice and originality – was pleasing for Devine. "I was absolutely blown away," he says.

For a number of years, Devine used to play the game a lot. His config is still on there but he's changed it up a bit since the release. He tends to play more console games now than PC games and migrated to *Halo* when he made *Halo Wars*. But there will always be fondness for *Quake III Arena* in his heart.

"The mod community has sparked game companies, careers, and a tremendous outlet of creativity over the years and I think I'm really proud of some of the work I've seen," he says. "People still play q3test1 and q3test2 today. That blows me away. *Quake III* was a combination of the right team of people at the right time with the correct amount of passion. It's rare that that happens and I've been lucky enough to be part of that a few times. "Occasionally I'll see a 'Special thanks to Graeme Devine' appear in a game's credits and it makes me feel very humble. *Quake III Arena* belongs to id Software, and a tremendous team headed up by John Carmack made it. I think it was John's intuition to make modding easy that really let this thing take off and I'm so glad to have been part of it. To quote Sarge, 'Mmmmm… Smells like fresh meat.'"



The bots put up quite a fight.



id Software found itself going up againt Epic's *Unreal Tournament*, and a bloody battle it was too.

Communication skills

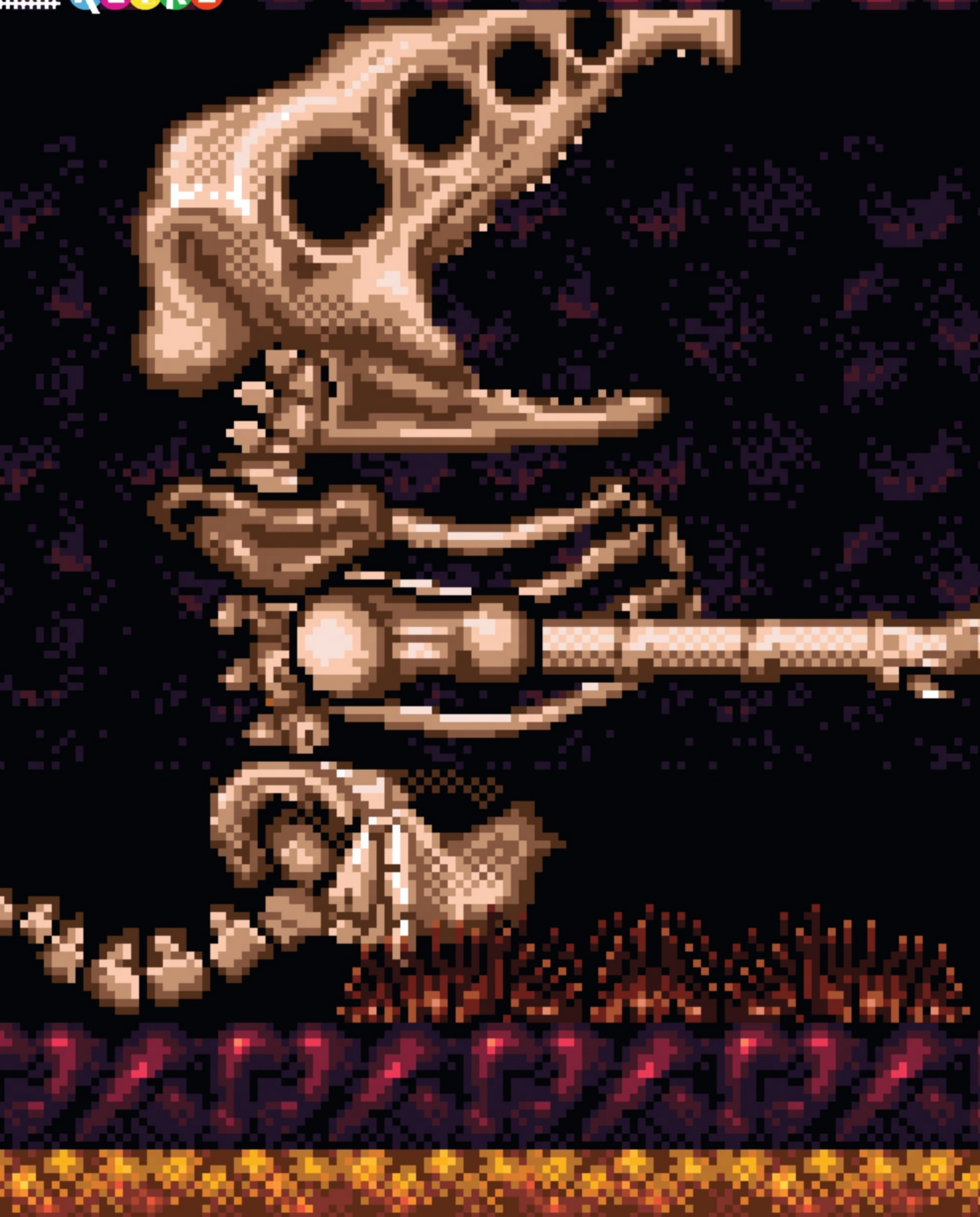
During the time *Quake III Arena* was being produced, id Software was still very small and there were just 14 developers. It meant development was incredibly hands-on. "We didn't need a lot of process to manage the team," says van Waveren, who developed his bots in six months. "The communication may not always have been ideal but everyone had a pretty good sense of what everyone else was working on."

Given the budget and the relative lack of people, the developers pitched in to the game-testing process too. "Everyone played the game daily and we regularly had friends over to play the game and provide additional feedback," van Waveren adds, revealing that in the first month of employment he spend three hours straight every morning playing it. "It seemed like a good idea to become as good of a player as possible in order to write challenging AI for the bots."

This approach also helped to keep things simple. "Part of what makes the game stand out is the minimalistic design, van Waveren says. "The game sticks to the very core essence of an arena shooter, and does that really well with ultra-smooth, fast, addictive gameplay."

Not that he was also good at playing it. "We released the q3test so I was playing with other people online," van Waveren recalls. "I always ended up playing 1-1 with this one guy who would simply kick my ass every single time until finally after a month I beat him. After that I never saw him on our servers again…"





BEST BOSS

SUPER METROID

SNES [Nintendo] **1994**

■ FOR A company known for its outwardly family friendly appearance, Nintendo has a penchant for incorporating disturbing imagery into some of its most beloved properties. Mario suffocating underwater in his Nintendo 64 debut or Ganondorf's brutal execution in *The Legend Of Zelda: Wind Waker*. But when you're talking about true unflinching horror, then leave it to the *Metroid* franchise to uncover the dark heart throbbing beneath Nintendo's saccharine veneer. Enter Crocomire, a boss in *Super Metroid* that's notable for both the manner in which it is defeated and the terrifying nature of its demise. After Samus successfully powers Crocomire into a retreat, the beast falls into a river of molten lava, the flames burning the flesh from its bones as it howls in agony. Its cadaverous reappearance further cements the encounter as pure nightmare fuel and represents Nintendo at its most macabre.



GAME CHANGERS

FINAL FANTASY VII

Released: 1997 **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment America/Europe
Developer: Square **System:** PlayStation



Cloud's somewhat ridiculous, utterly enormous Buster Sword was originally referred to as the 'Giant Kitchen Knife' by character designer Tetsuya Nomura.

Redefining the RPG as we know it and providing a watershed moment for gaming's ability to be emotional and mature, Final Fantasy VII was one of the most important games in the PlayStation's life

FINAL FANTASY VII, the first big blockbuster RPG in the West, had its roots with Nintendo – but in a history as winding as any *Final Fantasy* backstory, Squaresoft ended up releasing its game on the PlayStation thanks to the CD-ROM format (which offered more space than the cartridges Nintendo would stick with for the next few years).

Sony, keen to capitalise on Squaresoft's defection, sank an astounding $100 million into the US marketing budget for the RPG, whipping up a furious consumer frenzy for the game. Mainstream TV commercials, sprawling billboards – it was uncharted ground for the RPG. Paired with an estimated development budget of $45 million, both Sony and Squaresoft had a lot riding on the success of the title (which, as the first 3D *Final Fantasy* game, had a lot to prove).

With the game shipping worldwide, Squaresoft committed over 100 digital artists to the game, from both Japanese and American development teams, setting up a new studio in Hawaii to house the bulk of the Western staff (the location of which would go on to influence the tropical locations in *Final Fantasy X*). *Final Fantasy VII* introduced the genre to the big-budget, cinematic FMV – something that has since become standard practice in the role-playing game; Yoshinori Kitase, director of the *Final Fantasy* series since *V*, always intended to be a film director until his career took him down the videogames route.

The hardware of the PlayStation allowed huge setpieces to be set up – allowing the player to involve themselves directly, pushing events on interactively before dropping in climactic cutscenes that served to punctuate the narrative while showcasing the art direction and visual fidelity of the game. The presentation of the pre-rendered backgrounds gave an almost voyeuristic look into the world, while many of the FMVs were intimate, street-level vignettes showing off the artistry Squaresoft was known for.

The infamous story beats *Final Fantasy VII* is defined by – the motorcycle chase through Midgar, Aeris' death, the encounter with Sephiroth in the flames – wouldn't have been as emotionally engaging without the rest of the world. *Final Fantasy VII* was one of the first console RPGs available to Westerners that actively encouraged player exploration, properly rewarding players for their

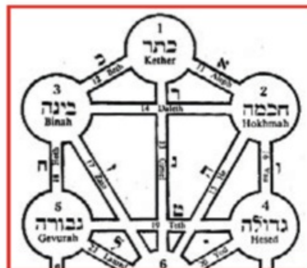
THE ANATOMY OF FINAL FANTASY VII

THE FAR-FLUNG INFLUENCES FOR FFVII



NEON GENESIS EVANGELION

★ In the Gold Saucer, there's a replica of Asuka Langley's D-Type armour on display in Dio's showroom. Both *Evangelion* and *Final Fantasy VII* contain religious parallels, and young protagonists being forced into world-defining events.



KABBALAH

★ Final Fantasy VII contains allusions to Kabbalistic teachings; Sephiroth's full name (translated) is Sepher Sephiroth – a Hebrew translation of which reads 'Book of Numbers'. Some Kabbalistic teachings refer to a God emerging from dormancy into a state of sentient creation.



STAR WARS

★ Recurring *Final Fantasy* characters Biggs and Wedge got their first outing in *VII* (the translators finally getting the recurrent *Star Wars* reference) and the ragtag bunch of star-crossed protagonists faceoff against an evil empire (well, an evil corporation, at least).



DEEP PURPLE

★ Bear with us. Listen to *Burn* by Deep Purple, then listen to the *Still More Fighting* track from the *Final Fantasy VII* OST. We'd chalk this one down to coincidence if Nobou Uematsu hadn't hired Deep Purple's Ian Gillan to provide vocals for *Blue Dragon* back in 2006.

efforts with bonus story content or practical loot: chocobo breeding, the secret 'Weapon' super-bosses and even two characters (Yuffie and Vincent) were completely optional. Compound that with character- and location-specific scenes that could only be triggered by having certain party members present, and you've got a world that isn't just complete, but seemingly alive – every facet of The Planet was deeply considered (perhaps the result of employing so many digital artists). RPGs had hidden elements in them before, but *Final Fantasy VII* elevated the prestige of completing these bonus missions and gave rewards for doing so – ultimate weapons, bonus cutscenes, special materia, hidden summons, all combined to push the player's completionist buttons, whilst simultaneously realising the history and atmosphere of the world.

■■■ The battle system implemented in the title also hit upon two delicate sweet spots. Accessible enough for the casual newcomer and familiar enough for the core gamer, battles in *VII* kept the Active-Time Battle introduced in *IV* – lacing each encounter with a dynamic immediacy – whilst also stripping away the class-based abilities the series had been built on. By introducing materia – crystallised planetary life-force that gave characters access to abilities, skills and commands – *Final Fantasy VII* could forgo the limitations that certain 'jobs' imposed on characters in previous games: healers were no longer ignored until boss fights, tanks could cast spells, mages weren't one-hit kill glass cannons.

By weaving materia into the larger narrative, *Final Fantasy VII* could get away with something unique – killing off a central character. As a player, *Final Fantasy VII* made you feel powerful. It made you feel smart. The micromanagement with materia distribution, the party setups you could enact, the pace at which you chose to grind or explore – it all made you feel in control. Aeris' death, for many still a watershed moment in gaming, remains one of the most memorable points within the genre. It's now more common to see, but when it first happened, it stripped power away form the player in a very knowing and intentional way. The narrative conceit has since been analysed to exhaustion, and often labelled overrated, but *Final Fantasy VII* was the first to do this kind of player manipulation on such a scale and, like in any art-form, that counts for a lot.

There have been many contenders to *Final Fantasy VII*'s RPG throne, but few of them manage to combine all the elements the PlayStation's first *Final Fantasy* did. The world was built to make players feel involved, the FMVs were directed to imitate all the best bits of Nineties action movies, the characters were designed to make us understand them, the mechanics were designed to make us *want* to explore them… *Final Fantasy VII* was the sales high point of gaming on the PlayStation, and laid the foundations for one of the most devoutly followed genres in the industry, as well as solidifying *Final Fantasy*'s stalwart place in gaming history.

SQUARESOFT COMMITTED OVER 100 DIGITAL ARTISTS TO THE GAME

KEY FACTS

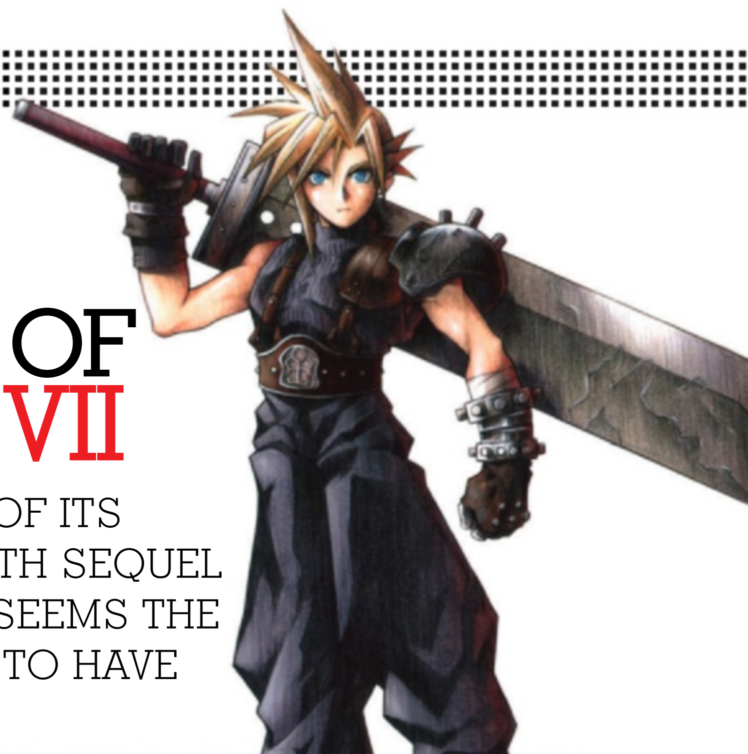
■ The game sold an epic 2.3 million copies within its first three days of release in its native Japan. On American shores, the game sold 500,000 in three weeks – hitting 1,000,000 within three months.

■ The technology that powered the FMV sequences of *Final Fantasy VII* inspired the game's producer, Hironobu Sakaguchi, to begin production on the first CGI *Final Fantasy* film, *The Spirits Within.*

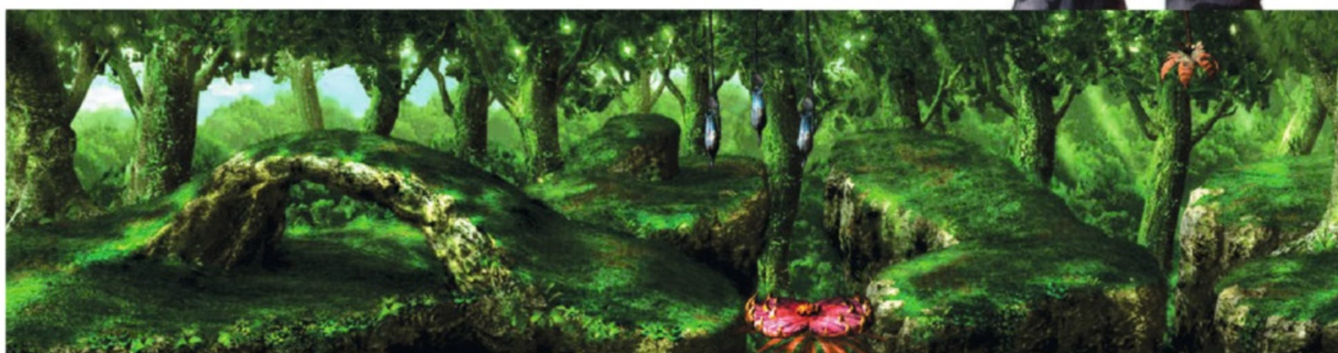
■ *Final Fantasy VII* is the best-selling instalment of the franchise, with over ten million units sold worldwide, inspiring several off-shoots and spin-offs.

GAME CHANGERS

ALL THE SEVENS OF FINAL FANTASY VII



FINAL FANTASY VII WAS AWARE OF ITS RIDICULOUS PLACE AS A SEVENTH SEQUEL IN THE FAMOUS FRANCHISE, AND IT SEEMS THE DEVELOPERS AND WRITERS WANTED TO HAVE SOME FUN WITH THE NUMBER…



TREASURE SPOTS IN THE ANCIENT FOREST

THE HIDDEN LOCATION Ancient Forest contains seven secret treasure spots, all of which can only be accessed after solving logic puzzles, which are certainly worth doing; some of the best weapons in the game for Vincent and Cloud are stowed away in the forest, not to mention some great materia.



7TH HEAVEN

TIFA OWNS A small restaurant/bar in Midgar's slums called 7th Heaven, which also acts as AVALANCHE's main headquarters in the game. 7th Heaven has since been a staple phrase in the *Final Fantasy* canon.



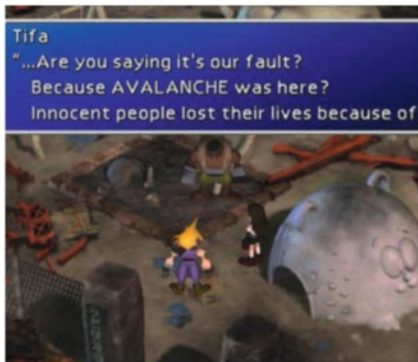
THE JOURNEY TO SOLDIER-HOOD

DURING THE NARRATIVE, it's disclosed that Cloud left Tifa behind in Nibelheim to join the mercenary group SOLDIER seven years before the main game's narrative. Tifa, being the loyal friend that she is, checked the local news for updates on Cloud daily.



SEVEN GUESTS

■ WHEN YOU FIRST enter 7th Heaven, there are seven guests occupying the available rooms of the tavern; Biggs, Wedge, Jessie, Marlene, Tifa, Barrett and – as you arrive – Cloud.



AVALANCHE

■ THE ECO-TERRORIST cell that Cloud is hired by at the start of the game – was conceived in capital city Midgar's Sector 7, later destroyed by Shinra to eradicate the group.



RED XIII'S WARNING

■ RED XIII TELLS you that the Meteor will fall to Earth in seven days. Handy, as that's just enough time for you to travel the globe, finish pending side-quests, and play a few games at an amusement park.

CLOUD'S FIRST LEVEL-UP

■ AS HE STARTS on level 6, Cloud always levels up to level 7 after his first battle against some machine-gun wielding guards as you try to reach the reactor core at the start of the game.



SEVEN'S COMPANY

■ ALTHOUGH THERE ARE nine playable characters – Cloud, Aeris, Tifa, Barrett, Cid, Cait Sith, Red XIII, Yuffie and Vincent only seven of them are mandatory, with Yuffie and Vincent being optional.



ALL LUCKY 7S

■ IF YOU MANAGE to land a fighter's HP to 7,777 in battle, the infamous 'All Lucky 7s' status effect will trigger – making the character in question unleash a flurry of 63 attacks, all dealing 7,777 points of damage.



GOLD SAUCER ATTRACTIONS

■ THE GOLD SAUCER amusement park – built over the ruins of Old Corel – is world famous for its attractions (of which there are seven). We say attractions, but they're more like mini-games.



YEARS IN CAPTIVITY

■ THE MAD SCIENTIST responsible for the SOLDIER programme, JENOVA Project and – worst of all – fathering Sephiroth, kept Aeris and her mother Ifalna in captivity in the Shinra Building's basement for seven years.



DAYS OF UNCONSCIOUSNESS

■ AFTER SEPHIROTH ACQUIRES the Black Materia and casts Meteor, the planet-saving Weapons awake and the resulting collapse of the Northern Crater renders Tifa unconscious for seven days.







INTERVIEW

STOO CAMBRIDGE

The artist behind Cannon Fodder discusses his time at Sensible Software, working in a 16-colour palette and the British Legion poppy that nearly pushed him over the edge

Sensible Software is arguably one of UK's most famous and pioneering developers to have existed during the Eighties and Nineties. They created several classic videogames, won countless awards and inspired an entire generation of gamers with their 16-bit graphics and offbeat sense of humour. Behind some of that magic was Stoo Cambridge, a young designer from Ilford, Essex whose love for videogames started at a very early age with the release of the Commodore VIC-20. Through interviewing Cambridge, it quickly becomes apparent not only how passionate and dedicated he is to his craft, but also how much blood, sweat and tears he's put into his work over the course of his extensive and rather envious career. We sat down with *Cannon Fodder*'s resident Elvis lookalike to discuss his humble beginnings, the game that shaped his career and finally the possibility of mouthwatering reunion between the Sensible Software team.



First off, could you tell us about your first computer?
The Commodore VIC-20. I was probably 14 or 15 at the time and my parents bought me it as a Christmas present. Some of the first games I played were amazing; mostly by Jeff Minter. Games like *Abductor*, *Laser Zone*, and *Traxx*. They completely blew me away. They were so much like arcade games – which is saying something because the graphics on the VIC-20 were pretty naff.

What first sparked your interest in a career in videogames?
My best friend got a Commodore 64 for Christmas. My parents didn't want to spend that kind of money, but a year and half later, they bought me a Commodore 128 and it was absolutely fantastic. I remember playing these games and thinking, 'What better way to earn a living?'. That was probably the catalyst for me.

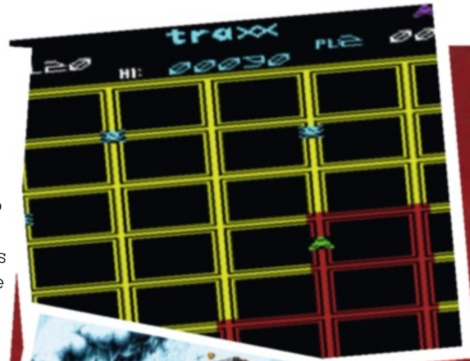
What was the first game you created?
I had a game that nearly came out on the Commodore 64, which was a *Shoot'Em-Up Construction Kit* hack. I called it *Battle Ball* and Power House were meant to publish it, but as luck would have it they went under just before release. I didn't even get a cassette. Thankfully, I still got my advance that allowed me to buy my Amiga 1000 and to then start creating a portfolio on Deluxe Paint.

DON'T TALK TO ME ABOUT THE POPPY. I THINK I INVENTED NEW SWEAR WORDS WHEN THAT HAPPENED

How was it that you got the job working at Sensible Software?
I was freelancing at the time and I saw an advert in one of those bi-weekly gaming magazines. I can't remember which one exactly but at the back of every issue they had a couple of pages of jobs and that's where I saw the advert for Sensible Software. I remember thinking that I had

DEVELOPER COMMENTS







"When Stoo started he was this fresh-faced young 'boy' all keen, and quiet! I was about 30, so very much the old man of the team. He was clearly a games nut, desperate to get into the industry and he quickly proved himself in the office. We worked together on cover disks and Stoo was always a pretty calm person like me, so although there were times of immense pressure to get projects done, we never came to blows. Well, except for one time I was playing football in the office with the guys and broke this present Stoo's parents had given him… Needless to say, he was mightily pissed off. Speaking of football, I'll never forget when we were making the *Sensible Soccer* music video and had to play football hooligans in Saffron Walden; that was great fun. Lunchtime pub visits were never the same after Stoo left."

CHRIS CHAPMAN,
SENSIBLE SOFTWARE LEAD PROGRAMMER



The game's anti-war message was unfortunately lost on some sections of the media.

nothing to lose, so I put a disc together and sent it off with zero expectations. The fact that I got a letter back asking me to come for an interview let alone got the job left me absolutely gob-smacked.

How big a change was it for you going from freelancing into a job?

It was a really exciting time for me because not only was I going to work for this company who I really admired, but it was the first time I'd ever lived on my own. Back then, Sensible was still in Cambridgeshire, so I had to move out all my stuff from my parents' house in Ilford, so it was a really big step for me.

Tell us about your first day at Sensible.

At the time, *Wizkid* was still being finished. Chris Chapman was putting the finishing touches to *Mega Lo Mania* and everyone was talking about doing a cover disk for Sim Brick – which was like a piss take of *SimAnt*. So anyway, I thought, 'I'm the new guy, I'm going to impress them here'. So I said I would do the art and Jon Hare (Jops), the creative director, said 'Great – but we'll need it finished by tomorrow morning.' So my first experience of working at Sensible was actually pulling an all-nighter to create the *Sim Brick* cover disc for *Amiga Power*.

Was Sensible Software as relaxed an environment as we've all heard?

It was very relaxed. In fact, we had loads of radio-controlled cars in our office, which we were always playing with. The first office was next to this old railway line and we used to take the cars out and launch them off the side of the platform when we wanted a break. In the end we had this massive bank of AA batteries that were kept constantly on charge whenever we wanted to take the cars out. That was the kind of place Sensible was. Also, it didn't really matter what hours you did, just as long as you got your work done in the end. If I wanted to take a few days off to relax, I could, providing I had got everything I needed to finished. That was just the way it worked there.

DEVELOPER COMMENTS

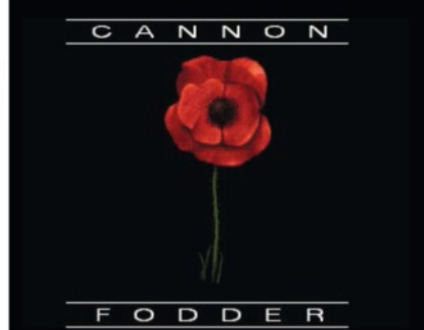


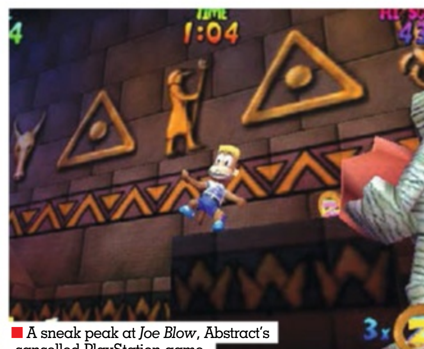
"The first thing I noticed about Stoo was his mop of curly hair. Up until when Stoo joined I had done all the art for Sensible so, from my perspective having another artist on board was both a blessing and a reason to be slightly apprehensive. It was great to have another guy to lighten the load, but then again at first I didn't realise just how good his work would be. He was hard working, organised, but equally pretty laid back, so the communication between us became very easy. As lead designer I pretty much told Stoo what we needed, gave him some detailed level designs and then we kept modifying it until it all fell into place."

JON 'JOPS' HARE
SENSIBLE SOFTWARE LEAD DESIGNER

Give us an idea of how you approached your work on *Cannon Fodder*.

Well, the way I'd usually start was to choose a couple of colours to use as the base, and then I'd built up my palette as I went along. It was very rare to start with a full palette and have 16 colours ready to go. If anything, I used to use about ten and have reserves. But the most difficult thing was animating it. I've always said that one of the hardest things was learning how to get the sprites on *Cannon Fodder* to look like their arms were moving backward and forward when they're walking. I mean, how do you show motion using only three pixels? My solution was to use a dark colour when the arms are back and then as it's coming forward you would get lighter using say, three shades of grey. I don't know if anyone else did that, but that was the only way I could get those sprites to look like they were moving. Some people in certain games didn't bother and they looked like matchstick men, but I wanted to make those little soldiers look as good as they possibly could.





A sneak peak at *Joe Blow*, Abstract's cancelled PlayStation game.

Did you get quite precious about the colours in your palette, given that you were limited to 16?

There was a point when we were doing the backgrounds and I hadn't put blue in my palette because I was trying to keep things realistic. I thought the water in the jungle wouldn't be blue – it would be green and murky and horrible. But then Jops said we've got to have blue water, and I remember getting very annoyed because I'd spent all this time on the graphics and I didn't have any room left in my palette. So I had to remap the tile set to have an extra colour to accommodate the blue. It was frustrating but the thing is, like I said before, you build a palette up from the start. You don't just go, 'I'll have four colours for explosions, two colours for the uniform', you have to build it up as you go and you make sure each colour has got multiple uses. Red for instance is used on the explosions and also on the crates. Everywhere you look there's reuse of the colours, whereas now you wouldn't do that because you're no longer restricted.


All work and no play makes Stoo a dull boy.

How annoyed were you when the British Legion complained that you'd used their poppy in the game design?
Don't talk to me about the poppy. I think I invented new swear words when that happened. I never thought drawing some poppy I bought off an old boy from the British Legion would cause so much hassle. I'm not an egotistical kind of artist, but I liked that poppy and we were up against the clock on so many other things at the time. So, when we had the British Legion kicking off, saying we were glorifying war and that we couldn't use it, I had to start all over again. I had to go out searching around fields in Saffron Walden just to find an actual poppy to redraw. I had to redo all the lovely bitmap work on the main titles and then all the other screens as well. It was a nightmare and the last thing we needed at the time. Thankfully, the game didn't suffer and, in truth, the publicity probably did us some good; but it was such a pain in the arse.

In your opinion, why do you think so many people failed to acknowledge the game's anti-war message?
I think a lot of people misinterpreted what we were trying to do. The media, sensing a story, jumped on the bandwagon and made us look like we were glorifying war, which as anyone who hass played that game can tell you, is completely ignorant. It illustrated to me the complete lack of understanding the wider press had of videogames, and in many ways it hasn't changed. Even now when someone's shot, there are still sections who will blame it on the fact the guy with the gun played videogames like *Grand Theft Auto*.

Why was it that you decided to leave Sensible Software?
I could see the way the company was heading during the middle of production on Sensible Golf. The writing was kind of on the wall. Something had changed and the office was getting quite big, and the place felt empty, even though it was full of people. Before that, it felt like a load of mates, having a laugh, making some great games and enjoying the process. But when it got to the stage when there was all these people walking about – many of whom I didn't even know – I thought this isn't 'Sensible' anymore. It was very sad because I didn't want to leave. In many ways, I felt like David Tennant in *Doctor Who* just before he's about to regenerate into Matt Smith. I was thinking, 'I don't want to go', but I had to. That's around the time I decided to leave to start my own company.


War had never been so much fun.

Are you surprised that Codemasters (who now owns Sensible Software) hasn't decided to experiment on the iOS platform with some of the IP?
Not at all. I don't think the management has the vision to resurrect those old titles to be honest – as much as I'd love them to. But then, you only have to look at what they did with *Cannon Fodder 3*.

I FELT LIKE DAVID TENNANT IN DOCTOR WHO JUST BEFORE HE'S ABOUT TO REGENERATE INTO MATT SMITH

Can you give us any insider insights into your time in charge of Abstract?
When I started my own company with Chris Denman – who I met at Sensible – it was great. We were very fortunate to get the deal we did with Telstar and they loved the platform idea for *Joe Blow* that we sold to them. We had offices in Braintree and everything was going really well. It was almost like Sensible 2.0 and we were having a great time creating *Joe Blow*, but then it very quickly went tits up. Telstar overspent, they pulled the plug on *Joe Blow* as they were closing shop and we were unfortunately one of the projects that couldn't get rescued by another publisher.



Sim Brick was the first game Stoo Cambridge worked on when he joined Sensible Software.

Other than *Joe Blow*, were there any other games that fell by the wayside?
There was a project I was working on with Gary Numan that never happened. Without giving too much away, it was a vampire game that focused on the quality of feed. So if you fed on old people, the life force you received was pretty low, whereas if you fed on a kid, you received a lot more. I think we called the project *Black Hunger*, which in retrospect isn't a very good title, but Gary's music at the time was going through quite a dark phase and it would have been perfect for it. It was a bit of a shame that we never got to see that idea through.

Do you miss working in that collaborative team environment or do you prefer working as a freelancer?
When we closed Abstract it was a bad, bad time for me. I remember thinking I couldn't do this again. I couldn't set up another company because I lost too much the first time. That's why I've been freelancing ever since. But if tomorrow someone said there was going to be a Sensible version two, I'd be there in a shot.

Have there ever been any conversations about reforming Sensible with some of the old team members?
We've talked about it, and we were thinking of doing a project a year or so ago. We did a few sketches, had a few meetings, but nothing ever really transpired. Everybody was sort of doing their own thing and I suppose when you're doing your own thing you prioritise your own work over any collaborative stuff. I mean, we've all got families now to provide for as well. One day, maybe, who knows? 

THE RETRO GUIDE TO...

THE LORD OF THE RINGS

As Middle-Earth: Shadows Of Mordor sees the works of JRR Tolkien transfer to high-definition, **games™** felt it was the perfect time to look back at over three decades of games based on the influential author's works

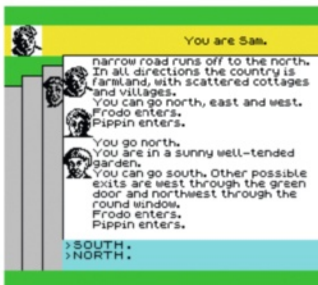
NO SET OF books has been immortalised as often in videogames as the works of JRR Tolkien. Ever since the official release of *The Hobbit* in 1982, gamers have been impressed by the digital worlds based on the popular set of books. The quality, as we'll discover, has varied greatly over the past 30 years, but it's a testament to the original books that so many gamers continue to buy into Tolkien's incredible universe. With *Shadow Of Mordor* now in full production we felt it was the perfect time to look back at the best and worst games based on Tolkien's classic literary works.



THE HOBBIT 1982

DEVELOPER: BEAM SOFTWARE **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

Fittingly, for a videogame based on a world famous novel, the very first official game was a text adventure. In fact, it went one better, using slick graphics to more accurately portray the world that Tolkien had lovingly crafted some 45 years earlier. Created by Australian developer Beam Software, *The Hobbit* was notable for its impressive parser, which was surprisingly complex for its time. Known as Inglish it allowed the player to create advanced sentences that far outstripped other text adventures and gave the player a surprising amount of flexibility while adventuring. Massively ahead of its time, it featured all the key plot points and characters of the book (which was also included with the game) and offered numerous solutions in reaching its ending. Little wonder that it went on to sell over 1 million copies.





LORD OF THE RINGS GAME ONE 1985

DEVELOPER: BEAM SOFTWARE **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

It took Beam Software three years to come up with a sequel to its innovative adventure. Using similar tactics to *The Hobbit*, *Lord Of The Rings Game One* came with a novel, *The Fellowship Of The Ring*, and continued to blend a solid parser with effective visuals (which had admittedly lost some of their impact over the three-year period). Spread across two cassettes, Beam Software expands on the book by adding original content, but stumbles badly with its attempt at humour. It lacks the impact of *The Hobbit*, being only a decent adventure.



SHADOWS OF MORDOR 1987

DEVELOPER: BEAM SOFTWARE
PLATFORMS: AMSTRAD CPC, SPECTRUM, C64



While *Shadows Of Mordor* improves on the first part of the *Rings* trilogy, it remains a poor second to *The Hobbit*. While the 128K offerings are the versions of choice due to their support of in-game graphics, the game suffers from poor loading times and the need to constantly save. The parser still feels clunkier after the sheer ease of using *The Hobbit*'s and it's telling that Beam Software never released volume three.

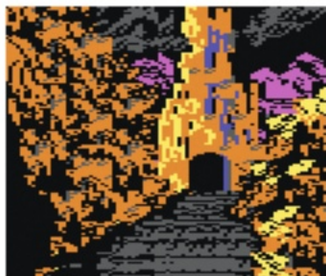
"THE 128K OFFERINGS ARE THE VERSIONS OF CHOICE DUE TO THEIR SUPPORT OF IN-GAME GRAPHICS"



WAR IN MIDDLE-EARTH 1988

DEVELOPER: MELBOURNE HOUSE **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

Many claim this to be the best strategy game to be based on Tolkien's work. Those people are stupid Hobbitses who clearly thought computers stopped evolving after the 8-bit generation. *War In Middle Earth* is actually a solid strategy game that's let down by crushingly slow battles (due to the game being crammed into a single load. It fares far better on 16-bit formats thanks to more involved combat elements and has additional elements not found in the 8-bit outings. It's a solid effort from Spectrum stalwart Mike Singleton, but there were far better strategy games to come…





CRACK OF DOOM 1989

DEVELOPER: BEAM SOFTWARE
PLATFORMS: COMMODORE 64, PC

■ Beam Software's *Crack Of Doom* looks rather nice, building on the static graphics it had created with previous text adventures and enhancing the Inglish parser. You start off as Sam Gamgee, and it closely follows the plot of *Book VI*, but it's a far tougher adventure than previous games in the series, which can make it a little too frustrating to play. A disappointing end to Beam Software's text adventures, particularly when you consider the inroads made by *The Hobbit*.



THE LORD OF THE RINGS VOLUME 1 1990

DEVELOPER: INTERPLAY/CHAOS STUDIOS
PLATFORMS: AMIGA, PC

■ One look at Interplay's game is enough to tell you that the *Ultima* series is a huge inspiration. What the screenshot doesn't tell you however is that this is one of the slowest RPGs around, particularly on the Amiga, which really strains to run the game. It's a shame that both *Volume 1* and its sequel are plagued by so many technical issues as there's an okay game with a good inventory system hidden beneath the surface.

RIDERS OF ROHAN 1991

DEVELOPER: BEAM **SOFTWARE:** PAPYRUS **PLATFORMS:** PC

■ Set around the events of *The Two Towers*, knowledge of the book can benefit you during the adventuring sections, as it allows access to allies that can really swing the game in your favour. The combat is fun, if a little basic, while the strategy elements are surprisingly enhanced for the time, even if they look like rubbish stick-men having battles. An interesting adaptation.







AND THE REST…

All the other official games and expansions released

■ **THE LORD OF THE RINGS VOLUME 2** (1991) **DEVELOPER:** INTERPLAY **PLATFORMS:** PC

■ **THE LORD OF THE RINGS: TACTICS** (2005) **DEVELOPER:** AMAZE **PLATFORMS:** PSP

■ **THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE EARTH II: RISE OF THE WITCH-KING (EXPANSION)** (2006) **DEVELOPER:** EA LOS ANGELES **PLATFORMS:** PC

■ **THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: MINES OF MORIA (EXPANSION)** (2008) **DEVELOPER:** TURBINE INC **PLATFORMS:** PC

■ **THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: SIEGE OF MURKWOOD (EXPANSION)** (2009) **DEVELOPER:** TURBINE INC **PLATFORMS:** PC

■ **THE LORD OF THE RINGS: ARAGORN'S QUEST** (2010) **DEVELOPER:** HEADSTRONG GAMES/TT FUSION **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

■ **THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: RISE OF ISENGARD (EXPANSION)** (2011) **DEVELOPER:** TURBINE INC **PLATFORMS:** PC

■ **THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: RIDERS OF ROHAN (EXPANSION)** (2012) **DEVELOPER:** TURBINE INC **PLATFORMS:** PC

■ **GUARDIANS OF MIDDLE EARTH** (2012) **DEVELOPER:** MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS **PLATFORMS:** PS3, PC, XBOX 360

■ **THE HOBBIT: KINGDOMS OF MIDDLE-EARTH** (2012) **DEVELOPER:** KABAM **PLATFORMS:** ANDROID, IOS

■ **THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: HELM'S DEEP (EXPANSION)** (2013) **DEVELOPER:** TURBINE INC **PLATFORMS:** PC

■ **THE HOBBIT: ARMIES OF THE THIRD AGE** (2013) **DEVELOPER:** KABAM **PLATFORMS:** BROWSER



THE LORD OF THE RINGS VOLUME 1 1994

DEVELOPER: INTERPLAY
PLATFORMS: SNES

■ Despite the *Volume 1* suffix, there was never any additional sequels to this 1994 SNES game. It's a standard top-down action RPG with a heavy reliance on fetch quests that run the wrong side of boring. You'll be wanting the two unreleased sequels just so you can reach Mount Doom and throw yourself in it. The music at least impresses, with plenty of atmospheric tunes, but the weedy-looking visuals and clunky combat would endear only the staunchest of fans. Little wonder there was an eight-year gap before another official game appeared.



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING 2002

DEVELOPER: VARIOUS
PLATFORMS: VARIOUS

■ There were two versions of *The Fellowship Of The Ring*. The home consoles outings are easily the best being a 3D adventure with fun real-time combat. While released after Peter Jackson's first *Rings* movie, it's instead based on Tolkien's book, as the film licence had passed to EA. Although it's showing its age, it's a decent adventure, which somewhat predictably, due to the loss of the licence, never received a sequel. Pocket Studios' GBA game on the other hand is a terribly bland, buggy turn-based RPG that we've already wasted too much time talking abo…



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS 2002

DEVELOPER: VARIOUS **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

■ Now this is more like it. EA decided to take a leaf from the book of Jackson, leaving Tolkien to not so much turn in his grave, as rapidly spin in it. And yet it works, more so when you realise that the source material is the work of Jackson, not Tolkien. Effectively a steroid-fuelled version of *Golden Axe*, *The Two Towers* boasts a selection of different characters, plenty of big bosses to take down and an entertaining combat system. The presentation is of a high standard as well thanks to voice work from the original cast that goes a long way to capturing the spirit of the film. It suffers from repetition like all scrolling fighters do, but this remains a fun adventure. The GBA version is its own game, being another capable scrolling fighter that, unlike it's bigger peer, supports multiplayer.



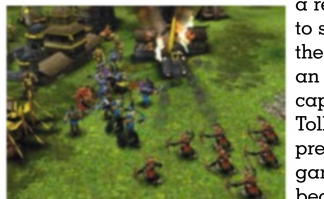


THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING 2003

DEVELOPER: VARIOUS **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

■ EA again released two different games, a more basic hack-and-slash for the GBA and a suitably fuelled brawler for home consoles. *The Return Of The King* is a more enjoyable game compared to *The Two Towers* thanks to its less linear level design and interactivity with environments. There's a multiplayer mode as well, making for a far superior sequel that still remains great fun to play. It's just a pity it looks so drab.





THE LORD OF THE RINGS: WAR OF THE RING 2003

DEVELOPER: LIQUID ENTERTAINMENT **PLATFORMS:** PC

■ Interestingly, while EA had secured the rights to the licensed films, games based on the books were still up for grabs. As a result Sierra Entertainment was able to secure the rights for an RTS based on the popular trilogy. The end result was an okay strategy game that managed to capture the scale of the epic battles that Tolkien described, but lacked depth. The presentation is glorious, but its generic gameplay makes it more suitable for beginners and Tolkien fans only.

BORED OF THE RINGS

There are plenty of unofficial games based on Tolkien's assorted works...

■ CONSIDERING THE INFLUENCE Tolkien's work has had in the world of fantasy, it should come as no surprise to learn that a great many unofficial videogames have been made over the years.

One of the earliest examples is *Shadowfax* by Mike Singleton, which had you playing as Gandalf riding the titular horse, avoiding as many riders as possible while dispatching them with magic. Singleton was a big fan of Tolkien, and his 1984 hit *The Lords Of Midnight* took its inspiration from his work.

There were additional text adventures as well, with Delta 4 releasing the parodies *Bored Of The Rings* in 1985 and *The Boggit* the following year, featuring delightfully offensive characters like Bimbo Faggins.

Moria on the other hand was released in 1983 and was a roguelike where you had to delve deep into the Mines of Moria to defeat the Balrog. It became extremely popular, leading to a version called *Umoria*, which was created for Unix computers. This in turn led to *Game Of Angband*, a dungeon romp that was first released in 1990. Moria's influence can still be felt today as it was the inspiration for Blizzard's *Diablo*.

Numerous MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon) have also taken their inspiration from Tolkien's books, while there are a huge number of mods available. *Medieval II: Total War*, *Warcraft III*, *NeverWinter Nights* and even *Skyrim* have unofficial mods and maps available for them proving just how much of a reach Tolkien still has.





THE HOBBIT 2003

DEVELOPER: INEVITABLE ENTERTAINMENT/SAFFIRE **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

Another *LOTR* game where the handheld version was completely different to the home console outings. The GBA game is a fun riff on *Zelda* with nice visuals and a good mix of exploration, stealth and action. The home console versions are a little weaker, being a 3D third-person adventure with more prominent stealth sections, an irritating camera and less precise combat. Fans will find that both games are worth playing but Saffire's GBA game definitely has the edge.





THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE THIRD AGE 2004

DEVELOPER: ELECTRONIC ARTS **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

EA's first attempt of a *Rings*-based RPG is surprisingly good. Interestingly, it gives you new characters to control, whose paths run parallel with the events in the films/books. Utilising similar combat mechanics to *Final Fantasy X*, it's a challenging adventure, that's only really let down by some unfair difficulty spikes and some quirky plot points. There's some great boss battles to be had, while character levelling again borrows heavily from the *Final Fantasy* series. The end result is a surprisingly good RPG, even if it does deviate from the original novels. The Game Boy Advance version by Griptonite Games is a completely different game, playing more like Nintendo's popular *Fire Emblem* series, but it's equally worth tracking down.





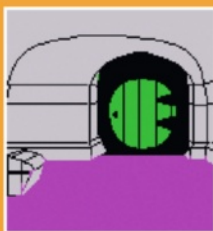
THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE EARTH 2004

DEVELOPER: EA LOS ANGELES **PLATFORMS:** PC

EA Los Angeles primarily worked on *Medal Of Honor* games, but you'd never have guessed it after playing this excellent RTS. While it's not the most in-depth example of the genre, it offers two well-balanced campaigns, great looking visuals and a superb soundtrack. It certainly feels conventional compared to more modern examples of the genre, but it remains a great game that effortlessly captures the sheer scale of the battles from Jackson's movies.







BEHIND THE SCENES INTERVIEW: THE MINI-MAKING OF THE HOBBIT

Veronika Megler on making the works of Tolkien a digital reality

Tell us about the design of *The Hobbit*

I put down the whole concept of having a network or a replaceable database of locations, animals that each had a character that they played themselves, and how all of that would work. I designed it in such a way that rather than hard-coding everything, we could pull out and replace the database of characters and locations and end up with a different game.

How did you go about choosing key elements from the book?

We all knew *The Hobbit* and *The Lord Of The Rings* – I'd read the entire series several times by that point. I went through the book, picking out key locations and pieces of the adventure that I could imagine how to turn into a puzzle or an interaction between characters and the player.

Why code in Assembler?

It meant we had more power available than BASIC games. Also, Phil encoded the message database, so you couldn't dump memory to read the game's messages. This gave us the ability to have a richer vocabulary, because we just had a dictionary of words and sentences were built up out of pointers to those words. We could substitute in whatever subject or object that we needed just as a little placeholder that allowed us to identify where the subject, the object and the verb went.

Why were Gollum's riddles a struggle to recreate?

I used several that were in the book, but then I had to come up with others that were like enough that they didn't stand out as having been written by someone else, but different from ones Gollum already used. I remember that taking a bit of time and a few attempts before I came up with something reasonable.

Interview extracts taken from issue 101 of **Retro Gamer**

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE EARTH II 2006

DEVELOPER: EA LOS ANGELES **PLATFORMS:** PC, XBOX 360





EA Los Angeles' sequel is a far better effort, which introduces additional factions, enhances the graphics and once again features members of the film crew. There's far more depth to the campaigns this time around, while the new game mode 'War Of The Ring' cleverly mixes turn-based play with real-life skirmishes, greatly adding to the already solid game mechanics. It's also notable for being the first time the series was on Xbox 360. While it obviously suffers in the control department, the system used is surprisingly slick, with one of the best console interfaces ever seen in the genre. It was followed by the expansion *The Rise Of The Witch King* which was only released on PC.



THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: SHADOWS OF ANGMAR 2007

DEVELOPER: TURBINE INC **PLATFORMS:** PC

This remarkable effort from Turbine Inc is arguably the best digital interpretation of Tolkien's work that we're ever likely to see. The developer had already proven it understood the world of *D&D* when it had released *Dungeons & Dragons Online* a year earlier, so who better than to be in charge of the very thing that had inspired *Dungeons & Dragons* in the first place? No one. That's who. *Shadows Of Angmar* rarely puts a foot wrong and has gone from strength-to-strength since Turbine embraced its new free-to-play model. The game is surprisingly accessible, but offers plenty of depth for veterans. There's an excellent range of classes on offer, while the levelling-up never feels unfair. It's been supported by five expansions, with the latest, Helm's Deep, increasing the level cap to 95 and letting you take part in epic battles.



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: CONQUEST 2009

DEVELOPER: PANDEMIC STUDIOS **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

This had the potential to be a great combat game. After all it's based on the robust *Battlefront* engine and armies and fighting go together in Tolkien's Middle-Earth like Hobbits and elevenses. There was even assistance from Weta Digital with the lending of digital models used in the film. Sadly for *Conquest*, it was about as much fun as a riddle contest with Gollum, with its bland combat and lack of variety hurting it greatly. EA realised its mistake and the online side of its last *LOTR* game was pulled just 14 months after it was released.



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: WAR IN THE NORTH 2011

DEVELOPER: SNOWBLIND STUDIOS **PLATFORMS:** PS3, PC, XBOX 360

War In The North took the robust combat found in EA's games, but married it to a flexible skill tree. The end result is a highly entertaining adventure that expands on the action-RPGs that Snowblind Studios first experimented with while creating *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* and *Champions Of Norrath*.

LEGO THE LORD OF THE RINGS 2012

DEVELOPER: TRAVELLER'S TALES **PLATFORMS:**VARIOUS

Ignore the fact this *Lego* game is guilty of letting its heroes talk with actual voices and you'll discover another fun game that will appeal to fans of the films. Traveller's Tales tells the whole film trilogy here, wisely sticking to its core *Lego* template, but introducing new mechanics like crafting items and a selectable character wheel. The voices jar a little with the slapstick nature of the cut-scenes and there's no denying that the *Lego* formula is beginning to run thin, but it remains an entertaining adventure that offers huge amounts of replay value for those with a need for collecting every last stud.







MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR 2014

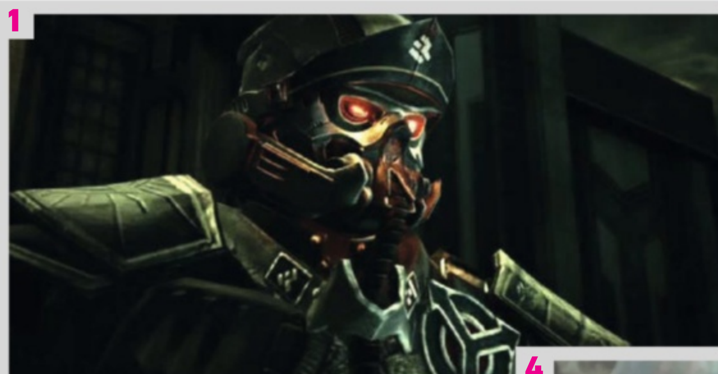
DEVELOPER: MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS **PLATFORMS:** VARIOUS

It's still a while from release, but we're looking forward to Monolith Productions' second *Rings* game (the first being MOBA *Guardians Of Middle-Earth*). It takes elements from many more popular games but we're confident that mechanics like the Nemesis system will be able to give *Shadow Of Mordor* its own voice.

ESSENTIALS

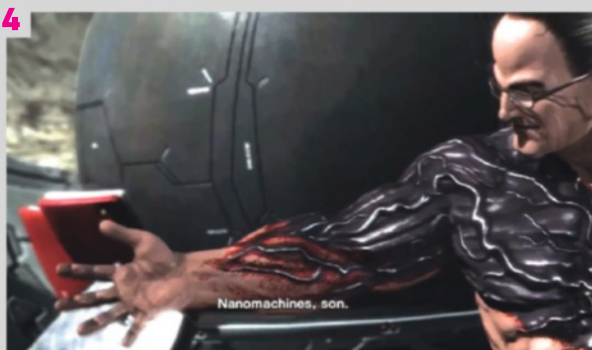
10 LONGEST BOSS FIGHTS

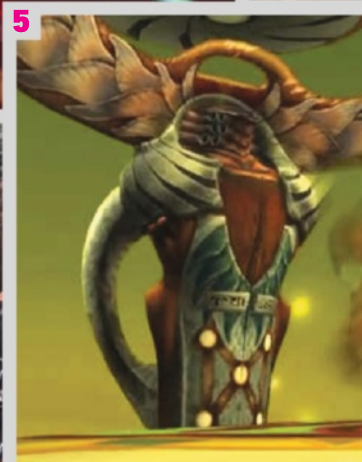
Ahh, boss fights – something only games can do. Spend hours pumping experience points into your team, reach the end of a difficult level and face off against an imposing enemy. Sometimes, though, it all goes wrong, and you find yourself sat in a tedious battle with a boss (in its *seventh* form) for hours and hours. We've collected the bosses we've begrudgingly spent the most time with for your viewing pleasure.

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Mael Radec
From: Killzone 2

1 We were surprised that a first-person shooter came up when we were compiling this list, but *Killzone 2*'s Colonel Mael Radec – Helghast leader and founder of the Radec Academy – just couldn't be left out. If it was just you and him, one-on-one, we're sure he wouldn't put up too much of a fight. But alongside his constant waves of Helghast soldiers, this boss fight becomes ridiculous (particularly on the Elite difficulty). There's even a Trophy available for players that manage to take out Colonel Radec in under 20 minutes – developer Guerrilla Games *knew* what it was doing when they coded this big bad boss.

Elizabeth
From: Persona 3

2 Only revealed during a player's second cycle of the game (read: New Game+), the ultimate secret boss of *Persona 3* is Elizabeth, the erstwhile servant of the Velvet Room that holds the demon compendium for her master, Igor. Like the game's protagonist, Elizabeth can wield a variety of Personae, and dealing with her ten well-selected minions is an incredibly difficult task. Worse yet, if Elizabeth feels threatened, she can unleash a duo of attacks dishing out 9999 damage each – killing you and setting you right back to square one. Great. Throw that in with an exceedingly high evasion rate and you've got an *incredibly* frustrating boss battle.

Jergingha
From: Wonderful 101

3 The Wii U-exclusive *Wonderful 101*'s final boss, Jergingha, is actually the mobile headquarters of The Guild of Evil Aliens Terrorising Humans with Jiggawatt bombs, Energy beams, Ray guns and Killer lasers (which is handily shortened to GEATHJERK). A button-mash-fest of the highest order, this entire battle can take up to an hour – at times it literally becomes 'mash A to save the Earth!' This is even referenced in a very self-aware way during a cut-scene that occurs mid-fight. Jergingha is voiced by Steve Blum, too – even a fight that lasts this long can never get boring when you get to listen to his dulcet tones.

Senator Armstrong
From: Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance

4 Another Platinum Games title, another lengthy boss battle with an emphasis on Quick-Time Events. *Metal Gear Rising*'s battle with Senator Armstrong may not actually be that long in the grand scheme of things (especially when compared to others on this list), but the fractal nature of the encounter makes it feel far more protracted than it actually is. The fight has a sort of rhythm to it; button-mash, cut-scene, button-mash, cut-scene, arena battle. Rinse and repeat. It's a horrible fight on the hardest difficulty, and the constant shift of combat and relentless power metal soundtrack really starts to grate after a while.

Penance
From: Final Fantasy X

5 With 12 million HP, Penance is a true superboss. He is accompanied by two arms that act independently to the main core (and regenerate when defeated) and absorbs all elemental damage. To make matters worse, Penance's second form is keen on using the Immolation technique – inflicting damage and draining all MP. You only stand a chance against Penance if you acquire each character's Celestial Weapon, and spam Rikku's Overdrive to create major buffing items. (If that all sounds like too much work, you can just use Yojimbo's one-hit-kill Zanmato move… but that'd be cheating, right?)















10

The Immortal One
From: Lost Odyssey

6 Overlooked by many because of its position as a Japanese RPG exclusively on the Xbox 360, Mistwalker's *Lost Odyssey* contained some of the trickiest secret bosses of the last generation. The Immortal One makes our list because of its ludicrous 175,000HP and insistence on casting regenerative magic on itself. It also had the ability to reverse all buffs on your party, making The One by far the most infuriating battle in the whole game. There was even a secret win condition on the enemy, too – win within 30 turns – that we always thought must have been impossible until we saw someone manage it online…

Boss Rush
From: Ōkami

7 *Ōkami*'s bosses were never particularly renowned for their difficulty, but at the end of the game – in a very typical Capcom tradition – all of the previous major enemies were thrown at you, all in more powerful forms. This gauntlet wasn't a particularly challenging endeavour compared to other battles on this list, but failure was most often prompted from losing concentration and making a stupid error – after which you would be sent right back to the beginning of the whole rush. It was a massive relief when the final big-bad finally showed his face – it meant you were nearing the end of this tedious campaign.

Dark World Dr. Fetus
From: Super Meat Boy

8 If clearing the game regularly isn't enough for you, then going back and winning each level in Dark World will open up Dr. Fetus's Dark World Boss Stage. The walking homunculus will chase you down with missiles for the first half of the level as you avoid the usual array of meat-slicing deathtraps scattered amongst the terrain. After that, you must make your way to the exit with Bandage Girl on your back. Granted, the level itself isn't that long, but most of the time spent on this boss will be figuring out the right path through the deadly contraptions laid out before you, all while dodging those bloody homing missiles…

Yiazmat
From: Final Fantasy XII

9 With the series' reputation for tricky boss battles, it's not really a surprise that two *Final Fantasy* games made it into this list, is it? Yiazmat will take you at least an hour if you're fully levelled, buffed and ready, but usually he'll take longer to vanquish. With over 50 million HP, Yiazmat holds the record for having the most health of any *Final Fantasy* enemy (in the PAL release of the game, you could only inflict 9999 damage at a time, too, making this battle far more difficult than it should have been). With attacks that inflict instant death or petrification, too, Yiazmat truly is one of the cheapest bosses around.

The End
From: Metal Gear Solid

10 The world's greatest sniper and mentor to The Boss, The End is actually quite merciful; if he spots you in the wilds of Sokrovenno, he won't shoot you down – no, that would be too easy. Instead, The End will tranquillise you and send you back to the jail in Graniny Gorki. This makes this fight *incredibly* long if you don't have the patience to take it slow and steady. (This whole encounter can actually be avoided, though; either by setting your system clock forward or waiting a week after saving during the battle, which kills The End of old age, or by sniping him out of his wheelchair earlier on in the game at the Ponizovje Warehouse).

THE VAULT

STEELSERIES H WIRELESS HEADSET

MANUFACTURER: **Steelseries** PRICE: **£254.66**

THE SINGLE WORST thing about wireless headsets is the laziness they promote. They're all well and good while you're playing, not having to bother with wires or inputs way over there somewhere, but when they run out of battery you have to stand up and everything. It's awful.

The SteelSeries H Wireless deals with this problem effectively, by giving you two swappable 20-hour battery packs – meaning you can vegetate on your sofa, uninterrupted, for longer. The transmitter that ships with the headset – an incredibly slick, convenient bit of kit – allows you to access the H's multiple audio profiles, and – added bonus – even shows you the remaining charge in your headset, something we feel other manufacturers seem to underestimate the usefulness of.

Typically, wireless headsets lose a sound quality due to how their transmitters work, but the H doesn't seem to suffer too badly from the wireless trade-off. At low volumes, the 7.1 virtual surround can get muddy, and if you're using the headset for music, the sound won't be as sharp as dedicated hi-fi headphones. Overall the H is a versatile, efficient bit of kit that holds an incredible charge, works at a range of 40 feet and, most importantly, is future-proof; compatible with the PS4, Xbox One (although it won't process game chat yet) and anything with an optical port.

The H hits a higher price point than other wireless sets available on the market, but if you're a marathon gamer – or if you just like headsets that *work*, no fuss – then they're definitely a worthy investment.





FABLES, VOL. 1: LEGENDS IN EXILE

PUBLISHER: **Vertigo** PRICE: **£10**

AFTER THE RAMPANT success of Telltale's *Fables: The Wolf Among Us*, we've been diving back into our comic pile to read through the full canon in order. Since the game is set 20 years before the events in issue 1, where would be better to start than the first trade paperback (collecting the first five issues of Bill Willingham's esteemed series)?

Expertly written and masterful at subverting your expectations when it comes to familiar fairytale creatures (Prince Charming as a sleazy opportunist is a highlight), *Fables* starts off a little slow but quickly grabs your attention. The contrast of having these mythical fairytale creatures hiding out in a modern metropolis is a strong framework, galvanised by well-drawn art, considered pacing and believable characterisation.

Everything here weaves into one addictive, compelling experience – Willingham manages to capture the magic of the fairytale while still making it relevant for an older audience.

GAMING CLOTHING



STREETS OF RAGE SHIRT

Strictly limited edition, Drop Dead's sleeveless shirt is the perfect attire for going out and getting into street fights.
http://tinyurl.com/o8xjwm3



ECCO THE DOLPHIN SHIRT

Drop Dead's unisex Ecco shirt probably isn't the best bit of kit for exploring the ocean in – all that salt water might ruin the tie-dye.
http://tinyurl.com/pv52uxf



GOLDEN AXE SWEATER

What makes you feel more powerful than walking around with a muscular, barely-clothed man wielding a sword on your chest? Nothing, that's what.
http://tinyurl.com/pt2q7ro

THE ART OF TITANFALL

PUBLISHER: **TITAN BOOKS** PRICE: **£29.99**

AVAILABLE EITHER INDIVIDUALLY or with the Collector's Edition of the game, *The Art Of Titanfall* promises to take readers deep into the inner-workings of Respawn Entertainment's multiplayer shooter – studying the developmental and concept art of the mecha Titans and human pilots alike. The book also contains a good amount of sprawling double-page spreads focusing on the decaying urban landscapes in the war-torn sci-fi world. It's an interesting read for anyone who is interested in the process of how games come from the ideas stage through to final product.



RAZER NABU

MANUFACTURER: **RAZER** PRICE: **TBC**



WANT TO MAKE your life that little bit more modern? Razer has you covered. Like a futuristic and stylish Pip-Boy, the Nabu will track exactly how far you've walked in a day thanks to its built-in accelerometer and also tell you how many steps you've walked and calories you've burned – which is always handy. To get going, simply hook the band up to an iOS or Android device, and it will display notifications to you, too – either 'privately' on the inward-facing screen or 'publicly' on the outward-facing side. Innovative, interesting and practical, the Nabu easily sits atop the Smart-band market.





FINAL FANTASY VII VINYL LIMITED EDITION

PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX** PRICE: **£44.99**

LIMITED TO A run of just 1200 copies, Square Enix has once again delivered a blow straight to the wallet of any hardcore *Final Fantasy* fan by issuing 29 of *FFVII*'s most notable tracks across two beautiful picture discs. Packaged in a sleeve that features screens from some of the game's most memorable full motion video sequences and individually numbered, the dual vinyls – one featuring Cloud, the other Sephiroth – are a must for any devout *Final Fantasy* fan (or any hipster that also happens to enjoy videogame music). A rare item to own, this limited edition set will undoubtedly be popular with those looking to expand on a collection.

RETRO CHAT

Talking to veteran industry figures
because MMO Worlds has gone missing



CHRIS WILD

Bringing Lords of Midnight out from the cold

When the legendary developer of Lords Of Midnight and Midwinter passed away in 2012, it was left to his collaborator and friend to ensure the games reached a new generation



How did you come to be involved in renovating the series?
I've been involved with the *Lords Of Midnight* series since the early Nineties when I first ported the games to DOS as a learning exercise. They were later released on the CD for *Lords Of Midnight: The Citadel*. Following that through with the Midnight Engine, which was an attempt to bring both *Midnight* and *Doomdark's Revenge* together into one engine that could be expanded. In essence it is that which is at the core of the current release. And then I helped out on *Midnight/MU* which is an online multiplayer version of the *Midnight* games.

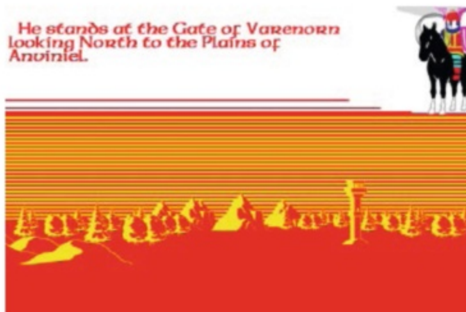
When Apple released the iPhone I knew then that it was a game changer. Mike had always said that he wanted to do something on mobile, so I contacted him immediately to discuss the idea. It never went anywhere for a few years, and then out of the blue he got back in contact and said, lets do it.

Do you feel a sense of ownership towards the series, or do you see your work as a tribute to Mike Singleton's vision?
Mike would often joke that I knew the games better than him. He after all spent less than one year working on *Lords Of Midnight* and *Doomdark's Revenge*. I have spent 30 years with them now. It's not as much ownership, I feel very protective toward the games. I feel that I know what works with the games and where they don't work. I would hate someone to just decide to develop a *Lords Of Midnight* game without spending any time considering its legacy.

Are you pleased with how the new versions of the games have turned out thus far?
On the whole, yes. There are a few things I would love to have been able to change. For example, the graphics are huge. In order to support three different resolutions for iOS the game has 130mb of graphics that compress down to a 30mb download. That's insane when you consider that the original game was less than 48k. I have icons that are larger than the original game. But that's the price of high resolution imagery.

Do you think you'll attempt *Eye Of The Moon,* the mythical third game in the *Midnight* trilogy that yourself and Mike were to collaborate on?
The next chapter in the *Midnight* series will be *Lords Of Midnight: The Citadel*. The 1995 PC game never really worked in full 3D, for various reasons. I would like to reimagine it using the traditional 2D landscaping technique. I'm not sure when I will attempt that though. Another year or so I guess. As for *Eye Of The Moon*, I'm really not sure. I do have material that Mike left behind, that deals with the story and the overall concept. But I feel that I would be making a big leap to turn it into a game. Part of me feels that it should now remain as a lost legend.





Lords Of Midnight and *Doomdark's Revenge* are out now for iOS, Android, Mac and PC. *Midwinter* is due 2015

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Cover Image

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Printed by Wyndeham Heron Ltd, Bentalls Complex, Colchester Road, Heybridge, Maldon, Essex, CM9 4NW
☎ 01621 877 777
Distributed in the UK and Eire by Seymour Distribution, 2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT ☎ 020 7429 4000
Distributed in Australia by Gordon & Gotch, Equinox Centre, 18 Rodborough Road, Frenchs Forest, NSW 2086
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Distributed in the Rest of the World by Marketforce, Blue Fin Building, 110 Southwark Street, London, SE1 0SU
☎ 020 3148 8105

ISSN 1478-5889







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